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Mixed Feelings About Feedback: An Exploratory Study of Students' and Lecturers' Emotions Pertaining to Written Feedback on Assessment

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Abstract

Written feedback on high-stakes assessment has the potential to provide students with valuable advice for future assessment episodes, but when feedback has a negative impact on students' emotions, it can negate any benefits. This exploratory study reports on the perceptions of 14 lecturers and 19 students regarding their emotions toward written assessment feedback within a university preparatory program for students at a regional university in Australia. Focus groups were used to collect data from the participants. The data were analysed with NVivo Version 11 software. The data were further analysed by the authors, who identified and categorised phrases pertaining to students' and lecturers' emotions about feedback. The study found that lecturers and students had mixed feelings about written feedback, especially when personal connections between lecturers, other staff, and students were tenuous. It concluded that further research focusing on the impact of emotions on how students perceive written feedback and apply it in future assessments could provide insights into how to enhance contemporary tertiary teaching and assessment practices.

Keywords: assessment; higher education; student emotion; lecturer emotion; written feedback

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1. Introduction

Written feedback on high-stakes assessment (referred to as feedback hereafter) is well recognised as having considerable potential to improve student learning (e.g., Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The accepted practice in higher education is to provide feedback based on the assumption that students will assimilate it to improve their performance in future assessment episodes (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Dawson et al., 2019). Feedback is currently constructed as being part of a teacher–student dialogue (Carless et al., 2011) and is understood to be an intrinsic component of assessment for learning (Wiliam, 2011).

The transition from high school to first-year at university is challenging for many students. Large classes in the first year often mean that students have little personal interaction with their lecturers and that casual markers are often responsible for evaluating assessment and providing feedback. Indeed, student dissatisfaction with feedback is widely reported in the literature (e.g., Pittaway & Dowden, 2014), especially in first-year (e.g., James et al., 2010). As Robinson et al. (2013) explained, first-year students' perceptions of feedback are influenced by their recent memories of receiving feedback from their high school teachers, which is typically more personalised, accurate and functional in terms of helping them improve future assessment.

As the provision of higher education has expanded and globalised, student populations have become more diverse. Students from non-traditional backgrounds generally have less cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1985), which implies that they may be less comfortable with student-centred pedagogies often used in university tutorials and may not be as well equipped to self-regulate or as ready to accept autonomy for their learning as other students. For example, a study in an Australian university that investigated the experience of first-year culturally and linguistically diverse students found that they faced challenges not usually encountered by other first-year students, such as connecting with their peers and understanding their lecturers (Kong et al., 2016). In the context of high-stakes assessment, which is inherently stressful, these students are less likely to be successful in their first year at university and are more likely to experience negative emotions, such as confusion, anxiety and frustration, and develop dysfunctional behaviours, such as self-sabotage and disengagement (Tempelaar, 2019).

The context for this exploratory study was a university preparatory program taught by university lecturers that ran after the final term of high school and before the university term commenced. The program attracted a cohort of school-leavers who had not qualified for university entry and thus had less cultural capital than their peers, who were more successful in high school and had already qualified for university study. The inspiration for this study stemmed from the premise that students who need additional assistance to qualify for university entry and lecturers may have considerably different understandings and beliefs about feedback (Carless, 2006). The study builds on previous work suggesting that students' perceptions of written feedback on their assessment are mediated by their emotions (e.g., Värlander, 2008). It explores the perceptions of lecturers and students regarding their emotions relating to feedback in a university preparatory program at a regional Australian university. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do students from non-traditional backgrounds respond emotionally to feedback in university preparatory programs, and how does this shape their approach to future assessment?
2. How do lecturers respond emotionally to the process of providing feedback in university preparatory programs, and how does this shape their practice?

2. Literature Review

The literature on written feedback on assessment in higher education has expanded significantly in size and complexity over the past two decades (Evans, 2013; Haughney et al., 2020). The field has attracted contributions from many disciplines, including sociology, psychology, neuroscience, and education, as well as from a range of learning and teaching contexts in higher education. This has enriched the field, but the multiplicity of perspectives has created challenges, especially in terms of implementing ideas from models into workable practices that are sustainable and inclusive. This review examines key aspects of feedback, students' perceptions of their feedback, and the role that emotions

play when lecturers or other markers provide feedback and when students receive and apply their feedback.

2.1. Written Feedback on Assessment

The provision of feedback in contemporary higher education contexts is broadly accepted as being an intrinsic and vital part of the learning and teaching cycle (Adcroft, 2011; van der Kleij, 2023). Feedback fulfils a dual role that conjoins the notions of evaluative judgment of students' work retrospectively and supportive commentary on students' work prospectively. On the one hand, the marker critiques and assesses what students have achieved, and on the other hand, the marker provides advice to help students improve their performance in future assessment episodes. This duality of purpose is described via various frames of reference, including formative and summative feedback, retrospective and prospective feedback, as well as feedback and feed-forward (Lipnevich & Smith, 2009). Recent studies have further extended this conceptualisation by foregrounding the diversity of feedback modalities employed in higher education, including written, audio, video, peer, self, and online feedback, often used in combination. Studies suggest that multimodal feedback can enhance accessibility, affective engagement, and clarity for students when aligned with learning intentions and assessment criteria (Adıgüzel et al., 2025; Mahoney et al., 2019).

The discourse in the feedback literature in higher education centres on a conceptualisation of feedback that has moved from a cognitivist model consisting of a one-way transmission of information from the lecturer to the student (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004), to a socio-constructivist model that incorporates an assessment for learning framework (Wiliam, 2011), emphasising learning as an iterative and developmental process and entailing a two-way dialogue between the lecturer and the student (Carless et al., 2011; Carless, 2016, 2019). Within this dialogic orientation, feedback is increasingly theorised as a longitudinal process rather than a series of isolated exchanges, with empirical studies demonstrating that its effectiveness depends on students' opportunities to engage with, apply, and reflect on feedback across time, tasks, and courses (Carless & Boud, 2018; López-Pastor & Sicilia-Camacho, 2017; Winstone et al., 2017). This dialogue model for feedback implies the need for a mutually respectful relationship between lecturer and student. It places high demands on students in terms of their agency and responsibility as autonomous learners who are able to monitor and adjust their performance to submit high-quality work.

The model implies an asymmetric power relationship between lecturer and student, which is exacerbated when students have low levels of cultural capital, thereby creating an impediment to communication that may be difficult to overcome. Longitudinal research indicates that such asymmetries may be addressed over time through sustained and continuous feedback designs that make expectations explicit and scaffold students' participation in feedback processes, thereby supporting cumulative development of evaluative judgement and self-regulated learning (Soria et al., 2023; Tai et al., 2018). The dialogue model for feedback is thus better suited to elite students who have high levels of cultural capital and are independent learners. However, it may be less effective for other students. To this end, recent research indicates that lecturers should take steps to enhance their feedback literacy (Carless & Winstone, 2023)—which is an important component within the concept of lecturers' assessment literacy (e.g., Pastore, 2023)—and incorporate learning and teaching approaches that foster the development of student feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018; Chong, 2018; Malecka et al., 2020). Evidence from longitudinal and program-level studies further suggests that embedding diverse feedback modalities within coherent assessment designs that are sustained across units or programs, is critical for enabling students to

progressively develop the capacity to interpret, judge, and act on feedback independently (Chen et al., 2022; Dawson et al., 2019).

2.2. Students' Perceptions of Written Feedback

Meta-analyses of research in the field find that while feedback has the potential to enhance learning, it is mediated by a range of factors, including the educational context and students' perceptions of feedback (Shute, 2008; van der Kleij, 2023). While fostering lecturer-student feedback dialogue is a step towards enhancing learning and teaching practice, students' perceptions about feedback can create barriers to effective dialogue. Even when feedback is individualised, technically accurate, and written with care, assumptions about students' ability and willingness to engage with their lecturers in feedback dialogues are problematic (Winstone et al., 2017).

Effective feedback dialogue requires students to be confident, motivated, and able to engage in discourse with their lecturers actively, but there are several pitfalls to be negotiated before these conditions can be met. Students may not comprehend their feedback, especially if it includes jargon (Jonsson, 2012). As such, feedback lacks utility unless students understand it and have enough feedback literacy to be able to apply it in the future (Carless & Boud, 2018; Wiliam, 2011). Students may disagree with feedback. Indeed, it has been long known that students variously accept, modify, or reject feedback (e.g., Kulhavy, 1977). Importantly, students often have perceptions about feedback that are substantially different from the intentions of markers (Carless, 2006; Dawson et al., 2019; To, 2016). Students may lack the skills needed to apply feedback in the future (Jonsson, 2012) and may be reluctant to disclose this during dialogue. Moreover, dialogue about feedback is constrained or even prevented when markers are anonymous (Pitt & Winstone, 2018) or when casual markers, who typically lack connections with students because they have no other involvement in teaching the students, are employed to assist lecturers (O'Donovan et al., 2016). Dialogue about feedback also needs to be flexible to cater to diverse learning needs within student cohorts, including those who may have less resilience or cultural capital; thus, feedback and ongoing dialogue may be ineffective unless it is tailored to meet diverse needs (Henderson et al., 2021). These pitfalls contribute to what Evans (2013) referred to in her review of the field as a "gap" (p. 94) between the theory of feedback and the practice of feedback.

2.3. Emotions

Emotions have the potential to powerfully mediate students' perceptions and interpretations of their feedback, especially in the case of high-stakes assessment (Dai et al., 2024; van der Kleij & Lipnevich, 2021). This is because cognition has been demonstrated at the biochemical level to be powerfully mediated by emotions (Duncan & Barrett, 2007). Strong emotions greatly degrade the ability to reason (Damasio, 1994) and can temporarily block students' ability to learn (Day & Leitch, 2001). Prior to receiving their assessment results, students may feel nervous, stressed, or fearful; then on receiving their results and reading their feedback, they may feel variously proud, elated, relieved, disappointed, or devastated (Harrison et al., 2015; Rowe et al., 2014). Accordingly, students may experience "emotional backwash" (Pitt & Norton, 2017, p. 512) and may not be in the ideal state to rationally reflect on their feedback and assimilate advice from their markers. For these reasons, Värlander (2008) proposed that students' perceptions of feedback, their receptivity to feedback, and their willingness to apply feedback advice should be interpreted via an emotional lens.

In the dialogue model of feedback, active participation by students in feedback dialogue is an intrinsic aspect of the learning process and an important element of self-

regulation that leads to being an autonomous learner (Carless, 2016, 2019). However, the ability for students to engage in higher-order thinking processes becomes problematic when negative emotions intervene and sabotage their capacity to think clearly. A UK study that explored undergraduate students' dispositions about feedback found that only a minority of the participants exhibited behaviours nurturing a growth mindset, whereas the majority exhibited self-defensive behaviours, which mostly meant that feedback advice was ignored (Forsythe & Johnson, 2017).

Negative emotional responses to feedback by some students have been portrayed in terms of these students being at different stages of emotional maturity (e.g., Ferguson, 2011; Pitt & Norton, 2017), but the emerging consensus is that emotional responses, which can be either positive or negative, are a natural and predictable response to receiving feedback (Lipnevich et al., 2021). For instance, a recent study of Filipino undergraduate university students' perceptions of feedback found that students expressed a range of positive emotions (joy, hope, and pride) and negative emotions (hopelessness, boredom, shame, anger, and anxiety) (Frondozo & Yang, 2023). Moreover, a survey of undergraduate students' perceptions of feedback in a regional university in Australia found that all of the participants reported an emotional response when receiving their feedback (Dowden et al., 2013).

Students tend to experience negative emotions in response to any feedback that accentuates the asymmetric power relationship between the marker and student by using imperative language or adopting an insensitive tone (Jonsson, 2012; O'Donovan et al., 2016). Harsh feedback has the potential for lasting damage to students' academic self-concept because some students perceive it as an adverse judgment on their suitability for tertiary study, rather than stand-alone feedback pertaining to a discrete assessment task (Dowden et al., 2013; Ryan & Henderson, 2018). Another consequence of negative responses to feedback is that students with less cultural capital may be more susceptible to perceiving feedback as personal criticism (Harrison et al., 2015; Ryan & Henderson, 2018), which may lead to alienation from lecturers and make it less likely that they will elect to engage in feedback dialogue (Robinson et al., 2013).

Similarly, students' mixed feelings about receiving feedback are analogous to those of lecturers when they provide feedback. In a study conducted in Chinese universities that investigated lecturers' emotional experiences related to providing feedback, Yu et al. (2021) found that some lecturers reported positive emotions, such as cheerfulness and contentment, while others reported negative emotions, including anger, exasperation, and irritation. Moreover, lecturers' emotions were mediated by their beliefs about the value of the feedback and the extent to which they believed students would engage with the feedback. Even when providing feedback was perceived as time-consuming and burdensome, lecturers reported positive feelings if they enjoyed feedback dialogue, if they believed that feedback would help students, and if they observed students making progress after receiving feedback (Yu et al., 2021). The findings of the Yu et al. (2021) study reinforce the point that lecturers need to maintain good emotional health in order to develop sound teacher–student relationships (Quinlan, 2016). Teacher–student relationships are built on mutual respect, which implies that the provision of high-quality feedback is grounded in the strength of existing teacher–student relationships and is mindful that feedback is mediated by students' emotions (Dai et al., 2024; Kastberg et al., 2020).

When students receive feedback but do not engage in dialogue, the quality of feedback is crucial. In such instances, Rust (2002) advised markers about good practice by recommending feedback that is prompt, encouraging, phrases criticism in terms of positive suggestions, uses conversational language, and offers students opportunities for discussion

(pp. 152–153). In addition, Carless et al. (2011) urged markers to provide clear, consistent, and accurate feedback.

Problems arise when markers are disconnected from the learning and teaching environment and feel unmotivated to provide high-quality feedback. Most marking in Australian universities is conducted by casual staff, which entails an element of risk due to vague feedback being provided by markers because they do not know students or do not understand the learning and teaching context (Crimmins et al., 2016). The risk is exacerbated if casual staff feel exploited by employment conditions that cater for the evaluation of submissions but do not allow time to provide adequate feedback. As such, casual markers, who are unable to establish teacher–student relationships, should be encouraged to provide warm and supportive feedback and avoid alienating students by making personal comments or writing empty platitudes, such as 'good effort', instead of providing specific advice on how to improve (Dowden & Allen, 2013).

In summary, the literature refers to a "gap" between the theory and the practice of providing feedback (Evans, 2013, p. 94), which has led to a "failure" in practice when students do not engage with feedback and are unable to assimilate it (O'Donovan et al., 2016, p. 939). The literature provides considerable evidence to support the notion that students' emotions mediate their response to receiving feedback. In the case of non-traditional groups of students or those with lower socio-economic status, there is a risk that their emotions will have a negative and exaggerated impact on how they perceive feedback. The purpose of this study is to explore lecturers' and students' emotions pertaining to providing and receiving feedback.

3. Method

This exploratory study was conducted in a preparatory program for university studies at a regional university in Australia, with the aim of eliciting the emotions of students and lecturers about feedback. The study adopted a qualitative interpretivist design, with an emphasis on valuing and highlighting the voices of the participants. As Chandler et al. (2015) pointed out, "one of the tenets of qualitative research is the emphasis and honouring of the participants' own words as generative of meaning and knowledge" (p. 1).

3.1. Instrument

The instrument for data collection was semi-structured interviews in focus groups (see Appendix A for focus group questions). As indicated by Wilson (1997) and Creswell (2018), focus group interviews were utilised for two reasons. Firstly, they helped to gather insights into both students' and lecturers' perceptions, attitudes, opinions and emotions regarding feedback. Secondly, they provided a space for participants to interact, build on each other's ideas, express agreement or disagreement and reflect collectively on feedback.

3.2. Participants

Data were collected from a total of nine focus group interviews comprising four Student Focus (SF) groups and five Lecturer Focus (LF) groups. The student groups included SF1 (5 participants), SF2 (3 participants), SF3 (7 participants), and SF4 (4 participants), with a total of 19 students. The lecturer groups included LF1 (4 participants), LF2 (2 participants), LF3 (3 participants), LF4 (2 participants), and LF5 (3 participants), with a total of 14 lecturers. Each focus group interview lasted approximately one hour, although the exact duration varied depending on the number of participants and group dynamics. All of the participants were self-selecting via the simple process of choosing (or not choosing) to attend a focus group session, thus they were not purposively sampled. The students were drawn from a diverse cohort of school-leavers who had not yet qualified for university

entry and were mostly 18–19 years old. The lecturers were drawn from a pool of university staff who specialised in preparing students for university study.

3.3. Ethics

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles set in the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval to conduct the study was granted by the ethics committee of University of Southern Queensland. All lecturers and students in the program were invited to participate in the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, thus individuals were not coerced or obligated to take part. Each participant provided informed and written consent for participation in the research. To protect confidentiality and preserve participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were not assigned to individuals. Instead, the focus groups were reported at the group level, with individual voices referred to in general terms (e.g., "a student", "another student"). This approach preserved participants' privacy while allowing their perspectives to be authentically represented through illustrative quotes. This strategy is consistent with recommendations in qualitative research ethics, where protecting anonymity is paramount, particularly in small and easily identifiable groups (Kaiser, 2009; Saunders et al., 2015).

3.4. Data Analysis

The focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a research assistant. The data were initially analysed with NVivo Version 11 software using a subset of codes derived from Haughney et al. (2020) on the features of quality feedback. A substantial body of published research exists on feedback. Hence, rather than attempt to generate a coding scheme based on categories emerging from the data, it was practicable to adopt a coding scheme based on published research. Haughney et al. (2020) described a coding scheme derived from Brookhart (2017) and adapted for a review of research on feedback. Their adaptation omitted some categories and added operational definitions to assist in the coding process. The codes, as adopted for use in this analysis, are listed in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, the coding consisted of two overarching categories: Strategies and Content. Within the Strategies category, the framework examined the timing and amount of feedback, the mode of feedback delivery (such as written, oral, recorded, and automated), and the extent to which the audience (individual or group) was considered. The Content category included several dimensions: the focus of feedback (such as task, process, self-regulation or self), type of comparison (norm reference or criterion referenced), function (descriptive or evaluative), valence (positive or negative), specificity (specific or vague), clarity and tone (active or passive engagement). Each code was operationally defined with guiding questions to support consistent analysis of the feedback provided.

Later, coding was undertaken in NVivo after setting up a hierarchy of nodes corresponding to the codes listed in Table 1. Each transcript was coded by selecting relevant text and linking it to one or more codes. During the coding process, it was common for text segments to reflect multiple themes. For example, a single segment might address both the mode of feedback and its emotional tone (e.g., its positive or negative valence) or it might combine aspects such as clarity and specificity. In such cases, segments were linked to multiple relevant nodes.

Further examination of the NVivo analysis was conducted independently by five of the authors, who used an interpretive approach to identify data points related to emotions (Creswell, 2018). The presence of emotion was interpreted as either raw expressions of emotion or justifications for mediating cognition, thereby providing motivation for actions (Damasio, 1994). Relevant and representative data quotes were selected to illustrate each theme, allowing opinions to be represented directly. These quotes were chosen based

on their clarity, emotional depth, and relevance to the identified themes. In addition, the selected quotes reflected a range of perspectives and were used to highlight both commonalities and divergences in the perceptions and lived experiences of the participant students and lecturers.

Table 1. Coding Form including Operational Definitions (Haughney et al., 2020, pp. 3–4).

Code Category	Code	Operational Definition Questions
STRATEGIES		
Timing	+/−	Was there immediacy?
Amount	+/−	Did it focus on 3–5 main points? Did it focus on learning targets? Did it focus on a balance of strengths and weaknesses?
Mode Type	Written Oral Recorded Oral Automated	
Audience	Considered/Not Considered	Does the feedback account for individual student needs? Is group feedback considered when the problem occurs across several students and may require re-teaching?
CONTENT Focus		
	Task	Did it focus on error correction, depth or quality of work?
	Process	Did it focus on how the student approached the task or connect what they did with the result that they got?
	Self-regulation	Did it focus on self-monitoring strategies?
	The Self	Did it comment on characteristics of the person who produced the work?
Comparison	Norm-referencing	Does the feedback compare student performance to other student performances?
	Criterion-referencing	Comparing student performance to a standard or rubric
Function	Descriptive	Feedback not connected to a grade.
	Evaluative	Feedback connected to a grade.
Valence	Positive	Describes how the strengths of student work match the criteria/norm, pointing out needs and providing guidance on how to address that need.
	Negative	Includes punishments, focuses on criticism.
Specific	Specific/Vague	Does it use nouns, descriptive adjectives, describe concepts or criteria, describe useful learning strategies?
Clear	Clear/Not Clear	Simple vocabulary and sentence structure, checking for understanding
Tone	Address the student as Active/Passive	Does it assume that the student is an active learner? Does it ask questions to activate thinking?

4. Findings

Four interrelated themes, common to both lecturers and students, emerged from the data analysis. These were: (1) beliefs about feedback, (2) mixed feelings about feedback, (3) the desirability of feedback dialogue, and (4) concerns about depersonalised feedback. A summary of the findings across each theme is presented in Table 2, followed by a discussion of each and accompanied by representative quotes from the participants that illustrate their various points.

Table 2 summarises the four themes that emerged from the study. The first two themes of 'Beliefs about feedback' and 'Mixed feelings', were more prominent and were consistently discussed by both lecturers and students with strong emotional and practical implications. These themes were embedded in participants' experiences and frequently

supported by rich and emotional quotes. In comparison, the third theme of 'Desirability of dialogue' and the fourth theme of 'Depersonalised feedback' were less prominent. In the case of 'Desirability of dialogue', both groups clearly valued feedback dialogue, but its implementation was typically constrained by institutional factors, such as the casualisation of marking or limited time allocated to marking duties. Although it was less prominent, the theme of 'Depersonalised feedback' was a serious concern for participants, especially in relation to casualised marking or anonymous feedback, but it was discussed less frequently than the other themes.

Table 2. Summary of the findings: Students' and lecturers' perceptions of written feedback.

Theme	Students' Perceptions	Lecturers' Perceptions
Beliefs about feedback	• Valued feedback when it was clear and actionable. • Mixed views on usefulness. • Some found feedback repetitive or generic.	• Valued feedback as essential for improvement. • Concerned about students misinterpreting feedback. • Time constraints hindered quality. • Questioned whether students read feedback.
Mixed feelings	• Mixed emotions: happiness with good grades, distress with poor ones. • Feedback could motivate or cause anxiety.	• Mixed emotions: some enjoyed giving feedback, others disliked marking. • Aware of the emotional impact on students.
Desirability of dialogue	• Sought clarification through dialogue. • Felt dialogue was necessary for understanding and applying feedback.	• Viewed feedback ideally as a dialogue. • Valued student engagement and personal interaction. • Believed dialogue enhances learning.
Depersonalised feedback	• Reluctant to engage with unfamiliar markers. • Found impersonal feedback less helpful and harder to interpret.	• Concerned about anonymous marking disrupting relationships. • Casual markers sometimes gave blunt or vague feedback. • Emphasised empathy and encouragement.

4.1. Beliefs About Feedback

Both the students and the lecturers valued feedback. They believed it was an important part of the learning and teaching process, albeit tempered by their emotions. Across both groups, feedback was consistently framed as forward-looking and improvement-oriented, indicating strong alignment with formative conceptions of feedback. However, this shared valuing of feedback was complicated by emotional responses that shaped how feedback was produced, interpreted and acted upon. Their comments were peppered with emotive wording and intensifiers. One lecturer commented:

> *It's important . . . (for students) to get feedback so that they know . . . how to improve. Without feedback, they've got no idea.*

Another lecturer indicated that feedback should be written with care:

> *Written feedback is (a delicate undertaking). . . You have to be careful . . . When students read it, they can . . . interpret it differently to what you intended.*

These comments illustrate lecturers' awareness of the affective risks associated with written feedback, particularly the potential for misinterpretation when emotional cues are absent. One student explained that 'proper' feedback allowed remedial action to be taken:

Once I get proper written feedback . . . (about) something I need to work on . . . I know what to do.

This contrasts with other student responses, highlighting variability in students' capacity to operationalise feedback. While some students perceived feedback as actionable and empowering, others interpreted it as generic or unhelpful, suggesting uneven feedback literacy across the cohort. The lecturers assumed that students understood feedback, but the students held diverse opinions about the utility of feedback. One student believed it was easy to apply feedback:

I sit down for about half an hour, and think well, if this is where I am now, if I was to do extra work, where would I be in the next assessment?

However, another student perceived feedback from different markers as being the same:

I (skim-read) my feedback . . . as it's the same for every single damn assignment. It doesn't matter (which subject), it's the same type of feedback for every assignment.

These responses suggest a disconnect between lecturers' intentions and students' experiences, with repetitive or formulaic feedback undermining students' motivation to engage deeply with comments. The lecturers felt that the pressure of other work commitments diminished their desire to provide high-quality feedback. One lecturer wanted to provide thorough feedback but felt constrained by time:

I want to do thorough feedback . . . (but there's) pressure to get (marking) done . . . (I want to) write comprehensive feedback . . . (but) I feel like there's never enough time.

Another lecturer questioned whether it was worth making the effort to write high-quality feedback if they were unsure that students would read it:

(I could) spend ages writing fabulous comments . . . but (will students) actually read them? Research suggests they don't read written feedback.

This reveals a cyclical tension: lecturers' perceptions that students disengage from feedback reduce lecturers' emotional investment, which may in turn diminish feedback quality and reinforce student disengagement.

4.2. Mixed Feelings

Both the lecturers and the students had ambivalent feelings about feedback. In some cases, their thoughts about feedback seemed to be swamped by emotions. One lecturer was positive:

I love giving feedback.

Another lecturer was negative:

Marking is the worst part of the job . . . I can't say that I've ever actually enjoyed marking anything. Ever.

These starkly contrasting responses indicate that feedback practices evoke strong affective reactions for lecturers, shaping their professional identities and potentially influencing consistency in feedback practices. The lecturers were aware that ill-considered feedback could have a negative impact on students. One lecturer explained:

Sometimes . . . feedback makes students feel really bad and hopeless. . . . Not that it's intended, but . . . (they can be) devastated if they . . . (get) negative feedback.

The students valued well-conceived feedback, but they still experienced a range of emotions. One student said:

I got the grade. . . . (It was) a pretty good grade, so I was happy with that.

Another student said:

I cry if I get a low grade.

Even when students appreciated feedback, they struggled to reconcile their emotions. One student commented:

Feedback is good because I can use it to improve my skills . . . But sometimes it pushes me down because I start panicking and worrying . . . It depends on how I react.

This suggests that emotional regulation plays a critical role in whether feedback leads to constructive learning or disengagement. The students disliked negative feedback, repetitive feedback or feedback that was vague. One student said:

I usually get heaps of negative feedback. . . . (It) doesn't end. (It) goes on for pages.

Another student said:

I read (feedback) carefully but usually find it doesn't help because it doesn't explain. . . . How do I incorporate it into . . . (my next) assignment? It usually never helps me.

The lecturers were aware of these issues, especially that negative feedback could be detrimental. One lecturer commented:

Comments have to be received . . . If it is all super negative, students tend to reject the comments.

Importantly, several student accounts indicated that emotionally supportive feedback could lead to measurable improvements in confidence and performance. One student explained:

My first lot of feedback was negative . . . then the second time (with) the same marker was very constructive . . . (because) I had improved.

Another student said:

The feedback I got . . . was really rewarding. It (gave me a) boost and made me feel more confident . . . When I handed in my (next) assignment, I got a better mark.

4.3. Desirability of Dialogue

The students and lecturers understood that, ideally, feedback is a dialogue between the lecturer and the student. One lecturer believed feedback had the potential for dialogue but accepted this might not happen:

Written feedback . . . (is) kind of a dialogue with the student . . . though you may not get a response, apart from seeing an improvement.

Another lecturer said:

Students . . . (need opportunities to) ask questions . . . (about) written feedback. I think (dialogue) can be really powerful.

These responses position dialogue as a mechanism for transforming feedback from static commentary into an interactive learning process. Some students viewed dialogue as an adjunct to feedback. They appreciated opportunities for additional explanation. One student said:

I go through all the comments . . . and if I don't understand them I (ask the lecturer) and get a clearer understanding of what they mean and what I need to fix.

The lecturers enjoyed dialogue because it included personal interaction and showed that students had assimilated feedback and could improve future work. One lecturer explained:

I like it when students ask me questions about their work and performance, and when I have that opportunity to give them that kind of feedback.

The students valued dialogue. One student explained:

I usually get general (feedback). But if I want proper feedback, I actually have to go to the [lecturer] and ask, 'what do you mean by this?'

The lecturers understood that writing warm and encouraging comments strengthened teacher–student relationships and had the potential to enhance learning outcomes. One lecturer gave an example:

Encouragement . . . helps students to (gain) confidence. One (Indigenous student). . . (received) amazing feedback from a marker who encouraged her and complimented her . . . and she just shone. She said, 'this made me feel like I can do this!'

4.4. Depersonalised Feedback

The lecturers believed that anonymous marking or completing marking for another lecturer disrupted the teacher–student relationship. One lecturer said:

I feel frustrated . . . marking (blind) . . . I've got no connection with the person who produced it . . . (it's) demoralizing . . . when I've got no idea who the people are.

Another lecturer said:

The problem is that we don't get to mark our own students' work . . . that's a break in the teaching feedback loop and I just feel all at sea.

The students preferred to develop a relationship with their lecturer rather than an anonymous marker before they engaged in dialogue. One student said:

Sometimes . . . (comments) are not very detailed . . . (but we) can't ask the markers because we don't actually know them personally.

This lack of relational connection emerged as a significant barrier to feedback engagement, particularly when feedback was perceived as impersonal or overly terse. The lecturers noted that casual markers were prone to blunt feedback. One lecturer said:

Some of the casual markers . . . can be very brutal (and) very blunt.

Another lecturer added that some students did not understand brief annotations:

A student who had, 'unclear' and, 'lacks cohesion', all through his (submission) told me, 'I don't understand what this feedback means'.

One lecturer summarised why casual markers can struggle to be effective:

Depersonalization happens . . . (if a casual marker has) a big terse response, to (a submission) . . . it can do a lot of damage.

Another lecturer explained:

If you know the students . . . (you have) personal relationships with them . . . (but when) you've got this distance . . . (feedback) can be quite blunt and quite negative.

These findings suggest that feedback effectiveness is intertwined with emotional tone, relational continuity, and contextual knowledge of students, rather than merely the technical quality of written comments. The lecturers believed that feedback should communicate empathy, support, and encouragement. One lecturer said:

Feedback . . . (is) about empathy . . . for students but balancing that with . . . getting them to take responsibility for their learning. It's about encouraging them to use feedback . . . to help them improve.

4.5. Summary

The four themes that emerged from the data analysis—beliefs about feedback, mixed feelings about feedback, the desirability of feedback dialogue, and concerns about depersonalised feedback—collectively illustrated that emotions appear to have a powerful influence on perceptions pertaining to feedback.

5. Discussion

This study found that the process of providing feedback as a lecturer and the experience of receiving feedback as a student were both associated with strong emotions. The students and lecturers believed that the main function of feedback was to offer guidance for future improvement, but both groups had ambivalent feelings about feedback. This implied the presence of a continuum of perceptions about feedback ranging from strongly positive thoughts through to strongly negative feelings. The lecturers and other markers indicated that in some instances their negative emotions undermined their ongoing commitment to providing high-quality feedback. The students indicated that negative emotions provoked by their perceptions of unsympathetic feedback could prompt them to reject the entirety of the feedback provided for the relevant assessment item. From a learning perspective, rejection of feedback by students is a serious problem because it reduces their willingness to engage cognitively with feedback, regulate their learning, and improve their performance in subsequent assessment tasks (To, 2016; Winstone et al., 2017). Negative emotional reactions reduce feedback uptake, impair self-regulation, and weaken academic performance over time (Pitt & Norton, 2017); whereas positive emotions can enhance motivation, persistence, and learning gains (van der Kleij & Lipnevich, 2021). These findings align with previous research explaining that feedback is not a neutral pedagogical tool isolated from external influences, but is instead powerfully mediated by emotional and contextual factors (Dai et al., 2024; Dowden et al., 2013; Evans, 2013; van der Kleij & Lipnevich, 2021; Värlander, 2008).

Both the lecturers and students indicated that genuinely effective feedback entails dialogue between the lecturer and the student. The students said that it was sometimes necessary to clarify written feedback to obtain 'proper' feedback that could be applied to future assessments. The lecturers believed that a healthy teacher–student relationship is a necessary precondition for students to be well-disposed towards receiving feedback, thus they had misgivings about utilising markers who had not taught the students. This supports the socio-constructivist model of feedback (Carless et al., 2011; Wiliam, 2011), which frames feedback as a two-way interaction. Dialogic feedback has been empirically associated with improved academic outcomes because it enables students to resolve uncertainty, calibrate their performance standards, and develop evaluative judgement, all of which are mediated by affective engagement and trust (Carless, 2016; Carless & Boud, 2018).

The lecturers commented that in some instances casual markers resorted to negative feedback, which has the potential to damage students' academic self-concept and lower their self-efficacy, thus increasing the risk of drop out. Casual markers are disconnected from the learning and teaching context, and their paid time is limited (Smith & Coombe, 2006). In addition, they may not fully understand that students' emotions mediate feedback and that feedback should be inclusive and cater to diverse needs. The students indicated that they were reluctant to engage in dialogue with unfamiliar markers. These results indicated the likelihood of significant barriers to implementing the dialogue model of feed-

back, particularly in mass higher education settings where casual markers are disconnected from students and where diverse cohorts may lack the cultural capital to initiate dialogue (Henderson et al., 2021; O'Donovan et al., 2016).

6. Implications for Tertiary Teaching Practice

The findings from this study suggest that the contemporary model of feedback as dialogue (Carless, 2016) may not be sufficiently inclusive and may not meet the diverse needs of students in the contemporary era of mass higher education. The prevailing recommendation in the extant literature to move from a one-way transmission model of feedback to a dialogue model of feedback makes sense from a theoretical perspective with ideal conditions. However, in practice, this is likely to be unrealistic because there are numerous barriers to creating effective dialogue. The exception, where the dialogue model of feedback does seem suited to students, is top-tier universities in competitive cultures in developing countries, where the provision of tertiary education is mainly for the elite. In such contexts, students tend to be competitive and proactive, student places are limited, and student drop-out is regarded as unproblematic. In mass higher education, however, the likelihood that most students will engage in feedback dialogue is remote. This flaw in the dialogue model is especially salient for students who feel marginalised and/ or have low cultural capital. As such, expecting all students to proactively engage in feedback dialogue is problematic. Many students have busy lives, are studying online and may be unable to contact their lecturers during office hours. Moreover, this expectation may be unrealistic for those without a strong tradition of attending university, such as students who are Indigenous Australians, students who are recent immigrants, students who are first in their family to attend university, or students who live in regional, rural, or remote locations.

We propose four ways to mitigate this problem. The first is to enhance lecturer education so that it includes adequate training in feedback literacy. The second is to implement a nuanced approach to providing feedback that capitalises on current and past models of feedback by inducing a greater proportion of students to engage in feedback. The third is to situate feedback within an ecosystem of learning and teaching that is supportive and caring, to reduce the impact of negative emotions on how students perceive feedback. The fourth is to manage casual or sessional marking with greater care and scrutiny. These proposals can be operationalised through coordinated professional learning initiatives, assessment design strategies, and institutional feedback policies embedded at the course and program levels.

Our first idea is for stakeholders to ensure that lecturer education includes adequate training and upskilling in feedback literacy. This is important because lecturers in low-resource contexts may not receive adequate training in contemporary assessment practices (Al-Akbari et al., 2026), let alone training in providing students with effective feedback. Such training should include attention to sociocultural, relational, and emotional dimensions (Pastore & Andrade, 2019) and should be interpreted and implemented via an inclusive lens. This may be enacted through targeted professional development workshops, mentoring programs, or micro-credential courses that model effective feedback practices using authentic assessment artefacts and student work samples.

Our second idea is for lecturers to implement both the one-way transmission model of feedback and the dialogue model of feedback. This relies on lecturers having adequate knowledge and understanding of feedback practices as stated immediately above. Implementing both models increases the chance that students will engage with feedback. In isolation, both models imply the need for students to have high levels of confidence and self-efficacy to engage with feedback or have the confidence to approach their lecturer and commence dialogue. When both models are implemented, there is a greater chance that

students will engage in at least one of them. The one-way transmission model should be implemented with the understanding that dialogue might not ensue, but lecturers should try to encourage it. For example, written or audio feedback may be complemented by optional follow-up consultations, structured peer-feedback activities, or low-stakes reflective tasks that prompt students to identify how they will act on feedback in subsequent assessments.

Our third idea is for lecturers in higher education to design learning experiences that specifically address student affect and develop strong teacher–student relationships and thus increase the likelihood that students will engage in written feedback. Noddings (1984) proposed a 'pedagogy of care' based on a moral and ethical argument. She explained that caring from women's experience is an intuitive way to show empathy. She observed that happy people are rarely mean, violent, or cruel; thus, she argued a case for including happiness in her pedagogy (Noddings, 2003). Nodding's pedagogy has been successfully adopted in online classes in higher education, where feelings of anonymity and alienation can be an impediment to creating a happy, connected, and supportive learning environment (Burke et al., 2021). As such, inclusive designs for pedagogy that are intentionally designed to cater to students' emotional needs should increase the likelihood that a greater proportion of students will engage in their feedback and subsequently participate in feedback dialogue. This may involve the use of compassionate language in feedback, acknowledgment of student effort, and early-semester activities aimed at building trust and psychological safety.

Our fourth idea pertains to persistent concerns about the occasionally indifferent quality of marking by casual or sessional staff (e.g., Smith & Coombe, 2006). At a minimum, all markers should have some familiarity with coursework and, therefore, should be allocated sufficient time to complete relevant reading and generally familiarise themselves with the learning context. In addition, markers should be mentored to ensure that: (1) they fully understand the scope and purpose of each assessment task, (2) they are cognisant of the knowledge and understanding that students need to demonstrate to satisfactorily complete each assessment task, and (3) they are provided with on-going professional learning and development addressing their assessment literacy including how to write sympathetic and supportive feedback. This may be supported through structured induction processes, shared marking exemplars, calibration meetings, and periodic moderation exercises that promote consistency and quality in their feedback practices.

In summary, the ability to provide effective written feedback on high-stakes assessments is a key component of lecturer assessment literacy (Carless & Winstone, 2023). Feedback should be personalised, warm, and empathetic. Feedback should be informed by sociocultural, relational, and emotional dimensions (Pastore & Andrade, 2019) and succinctly advise students on how to improve their work. In addition, feedback should recognise the diversity of student background and learning contexts; thus, it must be designed to stand alone as a coherent piece of meaningful and purposeful communication, especially if opportunities for additional dialogue are likely to be limited. Nonetheless, personalised feedback should also include a warm invitation for subsequent feedback dialogue, ideally preceded by general feedback to the entire class that encourages each individual to seek clarification or ask for further support.

7. Limitations of the Study

This study was exploratory in nature. While distinct trends in the data seemed evident, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The exploratory design prioritised depth of insight over breadth, which limits the extent to which causal relationships between feedback practices, emotions, and learning outcomes can be inferred. One limitation is that the study relied solely on focus group data and did not triangulate findings with other sources such as surveys, individual interviews, or observations. Future research could

address this by adopting a multi-method design to provide a more comprehensive account of students' and lecturers' experiences, for example, by combining focus groups with longitudinal survey data or individual interviews to trace changes in emotional responses to feedback over time.

A further limitation is that the participants were drawn from a single preparatory program at a regional Australian university. Accordingly, the findings are context-specific and should not be assumed to be generalisable to other institutional or cultural settings. The particular characteristics of preparatory programs—such as smaller class sizes and heightened academic support may have shaped participants' perceptions of feedback and emotion in ways that differ from those in undergraduate or postgraduate contexts. Future research could usefully examine similar questions across diverse institutional contexts and student cohorts, including large metropolitan universities, discipline-specific programs, and international settings, to explore how structural and cultural factors mediate emotional responses to feedback. In addition, further research in this space could explore differences in expectations and emotional dynamics among high school teachers and university lecturers.

8. Conclusions

This exploratory study set out to examine the emotions of students and lecturers in relation to written feedback on high-stakes assessment and captured their voices regarding these experiences. It found that students and lecturers experienced both positive and negative emotions arising from such feedback. In particular, negative emotions were associated with contexts where the teacher–student relationship is tenuous, such as occasions when casual markers provided feedback. The results of this study indicated that discrete models of feedback may not fully consider the mediating influence of emotions and, thus, adequately capture how written feedback on assessment is perceived by students. This suggests the need for further research on the impact of emotions on students' perceptions associated with receiving written feedback on assessment. The collective voices from this study provided useful insights into the broader emotional and relational dimensions associated with written feedback, especially the importance of strong teacher–student relationships and the impact of emotions on students' and lecturers' perceptions pertaining to feedback.

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Appendix A. Interview Protocols

Lecturers' focus groups guiding questions:

- Tell me about your understanding of the purpose of assessment feedback.
- What is your understanding of written feedback on assessment?

- What is it like for you to provide assessment feedback?
- What kind of feedback on assessment do you normally provide to your students?
- How do you provide written feedback on assessment? What is the role of assessment criteria when you provide feedback? Do you discuss the feedback process with anyone?
- What are the main purposes for giving feedback to your students?
- What relevance, if any, does your feedback have to students' academic progress?
- Do you have any other comments you wish to add?

Students' focus groups guiding questions:

- Tell me about your understanding of assessment.
- What is your understanding of written feedback on assessment?
- What is it like to receive feedback on your assessment?
- What kind of written feedback do you normally receive?
- What you do when you receive your marked assessment? Do you refer to assessment criteria and marking standards? Do you discuss your feedback with anyone?
- What relevance does your feedback have to your next assessment and academic progress?
- For what purposes do you use your feedback?
- Do you have any other comments you wish to add?

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