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The Complex Dynamics of Assessment Feedback in Higher Education: Implications for Leadership and Administration

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Abstract

Background/purpose. The purpose of this study is to explore how ecological complexities shape feedback processes and to propose a feedback literacy model that advances both theoretical understanding and practical improvement.

Materials/methods. The study employed a mixed exploratory approach. A structured online survey was distributed to 110 higher education professionals at an accredited university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), yielding 30 responses from faculty, deans, and quality assurance staff. The survey contained nine prompts derived from the international literature on assessment and feedback, covering pedagogical value, delivery challenges, and feedback literacy. Descriptive statistics were used to report levels of agreement or disagreement. To avoid reductionist interpretations, Complexity Theory was applied as the analytical lens to interpret results and develop a systemic feedback literacy model.

Results. Findings show strong agreement among participants on the pedagogical value of feedback in motivating students, identifying learning gaps, and shaping affective responses. However, respondents also highlighted persistent challenges, including heavy workloads, institutional constraints, and limited professional training in feedback literacy. The analysis revealed alignment between UAE-based professionals and international studies, underscoring both the universality of these challenges and the importance of contextual differences. These findings support the argument that feedback challenges extend beyond individual teachers or students and are rooted in broader institutional and systemic dynamics.

Conclusion. The study concludes that simplistic, linear models of assessment feedback are inadequate for addressing the persistent paradox in higher education. Instead, the Feedback Literacy Model, grounded in complexity theory, provides a more holistic framework that shifts accountability from individual stakeholders to shared, system-wide responsibility. By recognizing the interdependent roles of faculty, students, administrators, and policymakers, this model promotes sustainable feedback practices that are better suited to the realities of higher education.



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1. Introduction

Since the publication of the National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK in 2005, higher education (HE) professionals have been striving to theorize student assessment feedback and optimize its contribution to student learning. This task has proven elusive, as there remains no consensus on the nature of feedback or the best methods for its delivery. McLean et al. (2015, p. 922) observe that “several definitions of feedback have been used in previous research” and that “the underlying conceptions of feedback by different stakeholders [...] remain relatively unexplored.” Similarly, Pitt and Norton (2016, p. 2) note the multifaceted nature of feedback, arguing that understanding it requires “an appreciation of more than one singular construct.” Carless and Boud (2018, p. 1) add that feedback processes in HE are often misunderstood and challenging to implement effectively, failing to significantly influence student learning as intended. Furthermore, Henderson et al. (2019, p. 14), in a study involving 3,807 students and 281 educators from two Australian universities, confirm that “feedback is a complex process, influenced by an ecology of practices, individual factors and contextual constraints.”

While these observations highlight the complexity of assessment feedback, it is erroneous to conclude that no progress has been made. A Google Scholar search reveals over 5,790,000 publications on the topic, with 1,920,000 focusing specifically on undergraduate student feedback.¹ Thus, while feedback on assessment remains a concern in HE, this issue cannot be attributed to a lack of research or awareness of the variables involved. However, despite this extensive scholarship, a persistent paradox remains: HE has accumulated a substantial knowledge base about feedback, yet the practical impact of this knowledge on student learning and institutional practices appears limited.

This paradox highlights a clear research gap. Much of the existing work originates from the UK, US, and Australia, while contexts such as the Middle East remain underrepresented in the literature. It is therefore not clear whether the international consensus on the value of feedback, and the challenges of its implementation, resonates with HE professionals in other regions. Addressing this gap is critical, as HE is not a homogeneous global system but one shaped by cultural, institutional, and policy differences.

Instead, it is our contention that assessment feedback is a complex phenomenon that requires a move away from reductionist, positivist models that hold teachers or learners solely accountable. From an educational standpoint, this shift matters because feedback literacy is not only a matter of individual teacher or student competence but also of how institutions, leaders, and accreditation bodies enable sustainable feedback practices. We argue that HE professionals need to advocate for post-positivist, holistic models that recognize the roles of institutional leaders and accountability bodies (i.e., quality assurance and accreditation) in facilitating the delivery of quality feedback.

The rationale for the present study is therefore twofold: (1) to assess how HE professionals in the UAE align with the international literature on assessment feedback, and (2) to explore whether theoretical models beyond linear teacher–student causation are better suited to explain the persistence of the feedback paradox.

The structure of this paper is outlined as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature, highlighting significant advances in understanding the feedback phenomenon, the inherent challenges, and proposed remedial actions. Section 3 presents a study in which we administered nine prompts derived from the literature to 110 HE professionals in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to assess their alignment with existing assessment feedback literature. In Section 4, we discuss our findings, positing that a reductionist approach, which focuses on single or dual actants (teachers and students), is

¹ These statistics are accessed on 27/06/2024 at 11:59.

Source: https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=feedback+on+assessment+&btnG=

insufficient to capture the relational dynamics among all stakeholders within the system. To foster a shared understanding of assessment feedback as a complex system, Section 5 introduces the *Feedback Literacy Model*. Section 6 outlines the study's limitations, Section 7 presents the conclusion, and Section 8 offers recommendations for future research to strengthen assessment feedback practices in HE.

2. Literature Review

In the UK, an analysis of reports from nearly 3,000 quality assurance visits over eight years reveals a "failure of a significant number of institutions to provide adequate feedback on students' work" (Quality Assurance Agency, 2003, p. 28). However, this shortcoming cannot be attributed to a lack of research in this area. On the contrary, as Haughney et al. (2020, p. 7) note in their review of 18 years of literature, "there is a wide range of foci in the research literature," enabling the identification of "standards for quality feedback and their application." This paper highlights the most significant advances in the field that are directly relevant to our thesis.

2.1. Is Feedback a 'Process' or a 'Product'?

The conceptualization of feedback as "a process" rather than "a product" has gained significant traction in recent years (Carless & Boud, 2018; Dawson, 2020). Feedback is not solely about providing corrective comments; it is fundamentally about engaging students in the feedback process itself. Carless and Boud (2018, p. 1) argue that feedback involves more than just "teachers informing students about strengths, weaknesses, and how to improve." It also emphasizes "the centrality of the student role in sense-making and using comments to improve subsequent work." Similarly, Esterhazy and Damşa (2017, p. 1) assert that by shifting the focus from the teacher's delivery of feedback to the student's engagement with it, feedback is better understood as a process that highlights "how feedback comments are received, understood, and acted upon."

This shift in feedback conceptualization mirrors a broader transition from a behaviourist notion, where feedback is viewed as corrective information for passive learners, to a constructivist perspective, where learners are active participants in a dynamic learning cycle involving multiple stakeholders (McLean et al., 2015). In the behaviourist view, feedback is defined as "information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter, which is used to alter the gap in some way" (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 4) or as "information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 81). Adcroft (2011) critiques these definitions for portraying feedback mechanistically, as a message transmitted between provider and receiver.

Recent developments in HE emphasize the reconceptualization of feedback as a process requiring active student engagement for effective implementation (Brookhart, 2017; Carless & Boud, 2018; Dawson et al., 2018; Haughney et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2019; O'Donovan et al., 2015; Pitt et al., 2019; Valdez-García et al., 2017; Wheatley et al., 2015; Winstone & Carless, 2020). This process-oriented view of feedback aligns with the constructivist approach, where feedback is a collaborative, interactive, and ongoing activity that involves students, teachers, and other educational stakeholders working together to enhance learning outcomes.

2.2. What is Quality Feedback?

Research on assessment and feedback has identified numerous principles of good practice. Beaumont et al. (2011) note that extensive research has yielded a wealth of guidelines for effective assessment and feedback. Henderson et al. (2019, pp. 1–2) highlight two primary trends in the literature regarding what constitutes quality feedback. One trend emphasizes the characteristics of the feedback itself, the actors involved, and promotes student-centred feedback models. The other

trend focuses on students' attributes, such as self-regulation and feedback literacy—the ability to read, interpret, and use written feedback (Sutton, 2012).

Despite these different emphases, the literature provides various strategies for developing feedback literacy and models of effective feedback. Carless and Boud (2018, p. 1315) suggest that feedback literacy involves four key components: appreciating feedback, making judgments, managing affect, and taking action. They argue that peer feedback and discussions of exemplars can enhance feedback literacy and should therefore be integrated into the curriculum. Gibbs and Simpson (2005) propose seven conditions that promote effective feedback: frequency, timeliness, relevance, detail, focus on student performance, and ensuring feedback is understandable and actionable. Similarly, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) outline that quality feedback should:

- a. Help clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards).
- b. Facilitate the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning.
- c. Deliver high-quality information to students about their learning.
- d. Encourage teacher and peer dialogue around learning.
- e. Encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.
- f. Provide opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance.
- g. Provide information to teachers that can be used to shape teaching.

Broadly speaking, the first three principles align with the traditional behaviourist conception of feedback, while the latter four address a more constructivist approach.

While Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) principles collectively define quality feedback, recent literature has increasingly focused on principle (e)—encouraging positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem. Poorly framed feedback can negatively impact students' motivation (Nash et al., 2015; Pitt & Norton, 2016; Robinson et al., 2013; Smith, 2020), lower their self-confidence (Glazzard & Stones, 2019; Pitt & Norton, 2016; Smith, 2020), and reduce their willingness to use feedback constructively (Morris & Chikwa, 2016; Wheatley et al., 2015). Dawson et al. (2020, p. 4) suggest that effectively addressing the “affective challenge” during university years can help students manage emotional challenges in the workplace as well.

2.3. Who Should Be Feedback Literate?

There is a consensus in the literature that students must develop what Carless and Boud (2018) term *feedback literacy* to transition from passive recipients of feedback to active participants in the feedback process. For feedback on assessment to promote better student learning effectively, feedback literacy should be integrated into curricula (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 8). This aligns with earlier concerns that “students have seldom been trained or supported in how to use feedback” (Weaver, 2006, as cited in Carless et al., 2011, p. 395), and that they often rely on relatively unsophisticated strategies for using feedback (Burke, 2009, as cited in Carless et al., 2011, p. 395).

While Carless and Boud (2018) emphasize student feedback literacy, other researchers have raised concerns about the feedback literacy of teachers. Piper (1990, p. 639) claims that university examiners, whether internal or external, have not received appropriate professional training. Elton (2010, p. 640) argues that teachers deserve “the most urgent scrutiny” because “many of the current deficiencies in university assessment arise from a lack of understanding of the assessment phenomenon within universities.” Perhaps the most dramatic critique of these deficiencies is summarized by Lord Ashby in 1984. Dubbed “the wisest of academics of the past 50 years,” Lord Ashby confessed to overlooking the importance of teacher training and assessment:

For many years I taught in universities. Like most academics, I assumed that the only qualification I needed was expertise in the discipline I taught. It did cross my mind that how to teach might be a discipline in its own right, but I never gave it much thought. I marked thousands of examination scripts without examining what the scripts could teach me about my capacity as a teacher and examiner. (as cited in Elton, 2010, p. 640)

Elton (2010, p. 645) suggests that academics are influenced by a traditional view that improvement comes from imitating role models—assessing students as they were assessed, in turn perpetuating outdated practices.

This review points to a paradox. On one hand, HE has accumulated a rich knowledge base about assessment feedback. On the other hand, recent reports continue to frame feedback in HE as an ongoing concern because it often fails to significantly influence student learning (Carless & Boud, 2018; Haughney et al., 2020; Karunaratne et al., 2024; Winstone & Boud, 2020).

Addressing this paradox presents a theoretical issue that HE cannot afford to overlook. We contend that an evaluation of the theoretical assumptions framing HE's approach to student feedback is critical to addressing this paradox.

To anchor our theoretical exploration of this paradox in empirical evidence, we present a study conducted in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Most existing research has concentrated on assessment feedback in contexts such as the UK, US, or Australia, which raises the question of whether similar experiences and perceptions are shared in other regions of the world. This question is especially relevant when we confront the misconception that HE is a homogeneous global phenomenon. It becomes clear that there is substantial diversity and variability in discourses surrounding teaching, learning, and assessment, both between countries and within individual nations. As Brook (2019, p. 16) put it:

This variability challenges the assumptions often made in academic literature [...] about the uniformity of HE across Europe. Such assumptions overlook the unique characteristics and contexts of each country's educational system, highlighting the importance of acknowledging and respecting these differences.

Studies exploring variability in the conception of assessment feedback across different educational systems and settings are scarce. Yet, a study by Winstone et al. (2021) is sufficient to illustrate the lack of homogenization of HE globally. As such, following a comparison of questions about assessment feedback in student surveys across 15 countries, Winstone et al. found that “the transition from passive to active is not universally adopted” (p. 1525) and that more than 11 countries do not have national-level surveys that “assess students' evaluation of their experience pertaining to feedback” (p. 1527). This finding significantly contributes to our thesis by proposing two hypotheses:

- a. Pedagogically, the assessment feedback paradox cannot be fully understood by solely focusing on the feedback literacy of teachers and learners.
- b. Theoretically, the existing one- or two-partite causation models should be re-evaluated, considering the potential importance of other stakeholders within the educational system.

In light of this second hypothesis, it is important to consider whether alternative theoretical frameworks might provide a more adequate account of the paradox. Complexity Theory, widely applied in organizational and educational research, emphasizes dynamic, interdependent relationships among multiple agents within a system (Morrison 2008; Byrne & Callaghan 2014; Turner & Baker 2019). While it has not yet been extensively applied to the study of assessment feedback, it offers the potential to move beyond linear causation models by situating feedback within broader institutional and ecological contexts. This possibility will be taken up in the discussion section, where

we apply complexity theory to interpret our findings and to propose a systems-oriented model of feedback literacy.

To delve deeper into these hypotheses, the following section presents a study designed to identify the root causes of the assessment feedback paradox.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Context

The study was conducted at a university in the UAE that follows an American education model. The university is accredited by an international body at the institutional level and by various accreditation bodies at the program level. To ensure compliance with these standards, the quality of teaching and learning is overseen by the Division of Institutional Effectiveness and Accreditation. Faculty members are required to reflect on their teaching performance and student outcomes at the end of Fall and Spring terms. This reflective practice suggests that participants are encouraged to consider their assessment and feedback approaches as well as their students' satisfaction with assessment feedback.

This institution was selected as the research site because it represents a mature HE environment that combines international accreditation requirements with local policy priorities, thereby providing an appropriate context for examining feedback practices within the UAE.

3.2. Participants

Although the survey was distributed to over 110 members, 30 self-selected participants responded. As shown in Table 1, the participants included 25 faculty, 3 Deans/Associate Deans, and 2 Quality Assurance personnel. Eight participants taught classes of fewer than 30 students, 11 taught classes of 30-50 students, and six taught classes of 70-100 students. Regarding HE teaching experience, the distribution was as follows: four faculty members had less than 2 years, four had 2-5 years, five had 6-10 years, six had 11-15 years, two had 16-20 years, and eight had more than 20 years of experience. Additionally, 60.7% of the respondents had taught at all undergraduate levels, while 35.7% had also taught at the master's level. These details provide context for understanding the participants' perspectives on assessment and feedback in the university setting.

The target population for this study consisted of all full-time faculty and academic administrators at the institution. A purposive sampling strategy was employed, as the study sought participants with direct responsibilities for teaching, assessment, and quality assurance. Although convenience also played a role in terms of institutional access, this group was deemed suitable given their sustained engagement with feedback practices. The response rate (27%) reflects typical levels for online faculty surveys in HE.

Table 1. The Participants

Qualifications	23 PhD.	4 MA	1 BA	1 MSc		
Gender	Male 21	Female 9				
Age group	>50: 10	45-50: 6	35-40: 9	30-35: 4	25-30: 1	
Rank	Faculty with Teaching and assessment responsibilities 25	Deans; associate deans 3	Q.A, IE 2			
Number of students	30-50: 11	<30: 8	50-70: 1	70-100: 6	>100: 2	
Experience in HEd (in years)	<20: 8	16-20: 2	11-15: 6	6-10: 5	2-5: 4	>2: 4
Teaching classes	All undergraduate levels (60.7%)	MA Level (35.7%)				

3.3. Procedure

We distributed the survey via the participants' work emails. The survey contains seven sections. Section 1 contains introductory statements about the purpose of the survey and the researcher's commitment to research ethics and participants confidentiality. Section 2 seeks information about the demographics and university contexts of the participants. The remaining sections cover statements collected from the literature about (a) the participants' overall experiences with assessment at the university, (b) feedback design, (c) beliefs about feedback, and (d) feedback practices.²

The survey instrument was developed through a review of existing literature on assessment feedback and faculty practices in HE. Items were adapted from prior validated instruments and supplemented by researcher-designed statements to capture context-specific issues. To ensure content validity, the draft instrument was reviewed by two experts in HE assessment and one quality assurance specialist at the host institution. A pilot test with five faculty members (not included in the final sample) was conducted to check clarity, item relevance, and survey flow. Minor adjustments were made to wording for improved comprehension.³

The participants were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with these statements. Due to space limitations, only the findings that have direct bearings on the thesis of this paper are reported here. Specifically, section 4 of this study reports on the participants' agreement or

² The author acknowledges that several survey statements used in this study were adapted from the *Feedback for Learning Survey* developed by Henderson et al. (2016). Their contribution to advancing the assessment and feedback literature is gratefully recognized.

³ No formal statistical reliability analysis (e.g., Cronbach's alpha) was performed, as the small sample size made such testing impractical. This limitation does not compromise the study's validity, as the instrument's credibility was reinforced through multiple validation steps, including expert review, pilot testing, and iterative refinement.

disagreement with literature-sourced statements about the impact of feedback on students' performance, motivation, and affect (4.1), feedback challenges (4.2), feedback literacy (4.3), and whether feedback literacy should be integrated into the curriculum (4.4). These statements were presented under the heading 'What your colleagues around the world are saying about feedback on assessments in HE.' This framing was intended to reduce the pressure on faculty, as direct questions about personal limitations and accountability can be politically sensitive and may cause respondents to hold back their views.

4. Results

The results reported in this section are drawn exclusively from the online survey instrument, where participants rated their agreement with literature-sourced statements using a Likert-type scale. No interviews or qualitative follow-up discussions were conducted.

4.1. The Impact of Feedback on Students' Performance, Motivation, and Affect

The first category of statements presented to participants concerned the impact of feedback on students' performance, motivation, and affect. As shown in Table 2, 57.7% of participants strongly agreed and an additional 30% agreed that quality feedback helps students identify gaps in their knowledge. Moreover, 46.7% strongly agreed and 43.3% agreed that quality feedback motivates students. Regarding the affective impact, 30% of respondents strongly agreed and 46.7% agreed that the tone of feedback is one of the most critical aspects of how students react to it. Importantly, 20% strongly agreed and 50% agreed with the survey statement that students often exhibit defensive responses to feedback, especially when comments are critical or grades are low. These results, based on participant ratings of closed-ended survey items, align with prior studies (Hounsell et al., 2006; Nash et al., 2015; Pitt & Norton, 2016).

Table 2. Feedback and Students' Affect

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not sure
1. Quality feedback helps students identify gaps in their knowledge	57.7%	30%		10%	
2. Quality feedback motivates students	46.7%	43.3%		6.7%	3.3%
3. Affect refers to feelings, emotions, and attitudes. Students often exhibit defensive responses to feedback, particularly when comments are critical, or grades are low.	20%	50%	16.7%	3.3%	10%
4. The tone in which feedback is shared is one of the most critical aspects of how students react to feedback	30%	46.7%	13.3%		10%

These results indicate a strong agreement among faculty on the importance of feedback quality in student learning, motivation, and emotional response. This supports the literature's emphasis on the multifaceted role of feedback in HE.

4.2. On Feedback Assessment Challenges

The second bundle of statements examined the validity of two challenges reported in the literature. The first challenge is that teaching large classes impedes the delivery of quality feedback.

The second challenge is that institutional cultures and policies are largely oblivious to the difficulties educators face concerning assessment and feedback.

As shown in Table 3, 66.7% of participants agreed with both statements. Notably, while 26.6% of respondents did not agree with the claim that *experienced educators who teach large classes generally do not have the time required to provide detailed feedback on assessments*, no one disagreed with the statement that *policy frameworks and institutional cultures need to be developed to support effective feedback and that understanding the experiences, including challenges, of educators is as important as those of the students*. Those who did not support this statement chose to remain neutral.

Table 3. Feedback Challenges

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not sure
5. Experienced educators faced with teaching large classes generally do not have the time required to provide detailed feedback on assessments	26.7%	40%	23.3%	3.3%	6.7%
6. Some researchers argue that policy frameworks and institutional cultures need to be developed to support effective feedback. Understanding the experiences, including challenges, of educators is as important as those of the students.	26.7%	66.7%	0%	0%	6.7%

4.3. On Feedback Literacy

As far as statements concerning feedback literacy, Table 4 shows 13.3% strongly agreed and 46.7% agreed with statement 7. Additionally, 76.7% agreed with statement 8, namely that the effective implementation of quality feedback remains difficult due to teaching workload research administrative and obligations.

Table 4. Feedback Literacy

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not sure
7. Many assessors do not understand what makes good quality feedback. Most assume a grade with corrected mistakes and at best, an expression of praise is enough to improve student learning.	13.3%	46.7%	23.3%	3.3%	13.3%
8. Even when instructors understand the elements of high-quality feedback, the effective implementation of those quality elements can remain difficult because of teaching workload and research obligations	20%	56.7%	10%	6.7%	6.7%

4.4. On Integrating Feedback Literacy Into the Curriculum

Section 7 of the survey, titled “Final Thoughts,” aimed to gauge participants’ opinions about feedback literacy. The prompt read:

It is suggested that feedback literacy (understanding ‘what’, ‘how’, and ‘when’ feedback can be effective) should become a part of the curriculum. The argument is that such a course/workshop will help all stakeholders (students, assessors, and administrators) co-construct disciplinary-specific knowledge and skills to improve learning and performance. With this proposal in mind, do you think a course about feedback literacy in higher education is a good idea?

The results showed that 36.7% strongly agreed and another 36.7% agreed with this proposal. Meanwhile, 10% disagreed, and 16.7% remained undecided. Interestingly, participants verbalized their opinions extensively in this section.

One participant stated, “Often times, university teachers have not had any classes in how to effectively teach.” Another educator noted that “more likely, graduate schools don’t teach how to write feedback to assignments,” and emphasized that “as part of the continuous learning of faculty, curriculum design and feedback literacy ought to be institutional priorities.” This sentiment was echoed by another respondent who opined that making feedback an institutional priority “helps understand how to make it an EFFECTIVE one.”⁴

Another participant remarked that while few “teachers are aware of” what quality feedback is, they are “not practicing much.” Lastly, two respondents commented on addressing the knowledge gap among HE teachers. One suggested that feedback training should be disseminated through professional development workshops, while the other proposed that it “could be part of the orientation program” organized for new joiners.

These responses indicate a strong endorsement for integrating feedback literacy into the curriculum, emphasizing the need for institutional support and professional development to enhance the quality and effectiveness of feedback in HE. The detailed comments suggest that there is a recognition of the gaps in current training and a call for structured programs to address these deficiencies.

5. Discussion

“The literature has thus moved forward in how it understands feedback – but it is not clear if those involved in feedback have been brought along with it.” (Dawson et al., 2018, p. 2)

In this section, we interpret the survey findings in relation to existing literature on assessment feedback. Our results affirm the consensus reported in prior studies that quality feedback is widely recognized as essential for student learning and motivation (Hounsell et al., 2006; Pitt & Norton, 2016), and that many assessors continue to face challenges in translating this recognition into practice (Henderson et al., 2019). Specifically, participants strongly agreed that feedback identifies knowledge gaps and motivates students, echoing the widely reported pedagogical value of feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018; Winstone & Carless, 2020).

At the same time, our findings align with concerns highlighted in earlier research about the obstacles to effective feedback implementation. Participants identified workload, administrative pressures, and institutional constraints as barriers to best practice, which is consistent with studies documenting how contextual and structural factors hinder feedback quality (Dawson et al., 2018;

⁴ Capitalization in original

Haughney et al., 2020). This alignment suggests that the persistence of feedback-related challenges is not merely a matter of individual feedback literacy but also reflects systemic limitations.

Taken together, these comparisons show that our study corroborates much of the international literature while also extending it to a Middle Eastern HE context, where similar tensions between recognition of feedback's value and challenges of practice continue to prevail.

The assessment feedback literature we have reviewed predominantly originates from studies conducted in the US, UK, and AU. This body of work reveals that HE has accumulated substantial knowledge regarding what constitutes effective feedback and how to enhance its delivery and impact. There is now a consensus that feedback should be viewed as a process rather than a product (section 2.1); that stakeholders such as teachers and students should be feedback literate (section 2.2); and that feedback is an emotional process (section 2.3).

To assess how well these proposals resonate with professionals practicing in different educational contexts, we surveyed 30 HE professionals at an accredited university in the UAE. Our findings affirm the existing consensus: The pedagogic value of quality feedback is widely recognized, and there is little dispute that many assessors lack feedback literacy. Additionally, there is broad agreement that institutions should do more to help assessors overcome their limitations, and that workload, research, and administrative obligations prevent assessors from fully engaging with feedback best practices.

Given this context, it is crucial to delve deeper into our thesis. Specifically, we must ask: Why does assessment feedback continue to be framed as a conundrum despite the substantial body of knowledge accumulated by HE institutions?

One possible answer follows from Dawson et al. (2018). While much has been learned about feedback, it is unclear if the stakeholders—staff and students—are informed about these advances. Dawson et al. (2018, p. 2) suggest that “we do not know to what extent staff and students have been brought along with the changing understandings of feedback occurring in the literature,” highlighting a significant gap between knowledge and practice.

Another possible explanation is that feedback-literate teachers do not necessarily practice what they have been trained to do. This claim is supported by our findings and findings that have highlighted:

- a. the “dissonance between various conceptualizations of feedback and feedback practices” (Haughney et al., 2020, p. 8).
- b. feedback practices do “not match the instructors’ espoused beliefs about high-quality feedback practices” (Haughney et al., 2020, p. 8).
- c. situations where effective implementation of quality feedback remains elusive due to institutional challenges (Haughney et al., 2020, p. 7).
- d. Even though policymakers seek common systems of performance-based standards for teacher preparation, licensing, and certification (Cochran-Smith, 2001), malpractices continue to proliferate.

An alternative explanation, which we find most compelling, is that assessment feedback has failed to meet its mission because educators continue to frame the problem through a positivist perspective that defines assessment feedback with reference to either teachers or their learners, and recently, to both. Our insights from the literature and our study findings indicate that simplistic causal models fail to capture the complex nature of assessment feedback. Instead, multi-dimensional models of causation where the symbiotic relationship of multiple agents interact must be adopted (Pappamihel & Walser, 2009). As Section 5.1 examines at length, Complexity Theory (e.g., Turner &

Baker, 2019) offers an ideal theoretical framework to elucidate the assessment feedback paradox and inform the development of potential remedial strategies. To expand on this, we will first provide a concise overview of the fundamental principles of this theory, followed by an application of these principles to the concept of feedback literacy.

5.1. Complexity Theory

Complexity theory (CT) originally stems from system theory (Turner and Baker 2019). It concerns itself with organizations or systems that are complex (Walton, 2014). In complex systems a very large number of constituent elements or agents are connected to and interacting with each other in many ways. Consequently, to understand any organism one must consider its environment (Morrison, 2008; Walton, 2014). As Morrison (2006, 2) puts it “the emphasis is on collective, relational behaviour and holism rather than on isolationism, individualism and solipsism.” Within complex systems, the parts that make up the whole are themselves complex systems and some elements in these subsystems may be shared between multiple complex systems (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014).

The added value that such a theory can bring to education is echoed in education literature. According to Pappamihiel and Walser (2009) for example, CT has provided “a framework for understanding complex systems, which range from human beings to weather to business organizations” (134). Equally, according to Turner and Baker (2019), CT provides the right conceptual tools to study not only “the parts that contribute to the whole” but also to understand “how each part interacts with all the other parts and emerges into a new entity, thus having a more comprehensive and complete understanding of the whole” (14). Additionally, Morrison (2008) observes that CT can enable educators to transcend the simple causality that has been standard practice in education. Last but not least, Turner and Baker (2019) point out that the main attraction behind this theory is that it offers possibilities for thinking about the challenges and opportunities inherent in teaching, learning, and many other networked systems in education.

In the context of assessment feedback, applying complexity theory means moving beyond simplistic views that isolate teachers and/or learners as the sole stakeholders responsible for feedback outcomes. Instead, it acknowledges that feedback processes are embedded within broader institutional contexts, influenced by organizational structures, policies, and cultural norms. Lemke and Sabelli (cited in Mason, 2008) emphasize that within complex systems, interventions cannot be viewed in isolation; they are interconnected and interdependent.

Furthermore, Morrison (2006) underscores the holistic nature of complex systems, highlighting the importance of considering collective, relational behaviours over individualistic perspectives. This holistic approach resonates deeply in the discourse on feedback literacy, where systemic factors such as institutional cultures, accountability mechanisms, and professional development opportunities for educators play pivotal roles in shaping effective feedback practices.

Therefore, embracing CT allows us to appreciate the intricate dynamics at play in assessment feedback. It encourages us to explore feedback literacy as a networked phenomenon involving not only teachers and/or learners but also institutional leaders, policy makers, and accountability mechanisms.

5.2. Feedback as a Complex System

Both our empirical findings and the reviewed literature strongly advocate for the implementation of feedback literacy courses for both educators and students. However, our research also underscores that teachers may struggle to deliver quality feedback under unfavourable institutional cultures—such as imbalanced workload policies—and in the absence of effective accountability mechanisms, like student surveys or annual teacher evaluations, and program self-studies for licensure.

To this end, expanding the stakeholder framework beyond teachers and learners to encompass institutions and policy makers becomes imperative. While this perspective is not always emphasized, several researchers have echoed this sentiment. For instance, O'Donovan et al. (2015) argue that institutions must be courageous in adopting evidence-based and theoretically sound approaches to assessment feedback, which may necessitate fundamental changes in rules, processes, and resource allocations. Mountford-Zimdars et al. (2017) emphasizes the importance of understanding and sharing best practices across universities, advocating for an institution-wide approach involving senior managers, academic staff, professional service staff, and students as stakeholders.⁵ They highlight that such approaches are pivotal in addressing differential outcomes in student progression. Rowe (2017) stresses the complexity of feedback practices, asserting that scaling them up requires theoretical advancements and deeper engagement among academics, professional staff, and students at individual, group, and institutional levels. Similarly, Ajjawi et al. (2017) argue that feedback in HE is influenced by diverse individual, interpersonal, social, contextual, and cultural factors. They caution against educational interventions that overlook these complexities, which they suggest may underpin the widespread dissatisfaction with feedback in the literature.

While Rowe (2017) and Ajjawi et al. (2017) do not outline clear pathways forward for improving assessment feedback, Mountford-Zimdars et al. (2017) provides a useful causal model that views causation as multifaceted. Their model delineates interactions across *macro* (socio-historical and cultural structures), *meso* (institutional contexts), and *micro* (individual interactions) levels, illustrating how these levels interplay and influence student outcomes.

5.2.1. The Feedback Literacy Model: Building Shared Understandings of Assessment Feedback as a Complex System

Building on Mountford-Zimdars et al.'s (2017) complexity model, we conceive of feedback as a complex system where responsibility for driving positive change is shared among various stakeholders. In Figure 1, we present our perspective that feedback literacy is essential at multiple levels: for teachers and students (micro level), internal accountability mechanisms and policy makers (meso level), external accountability mechanisms such as accreditation bodies at the programmatic and institutional levels (macro level).

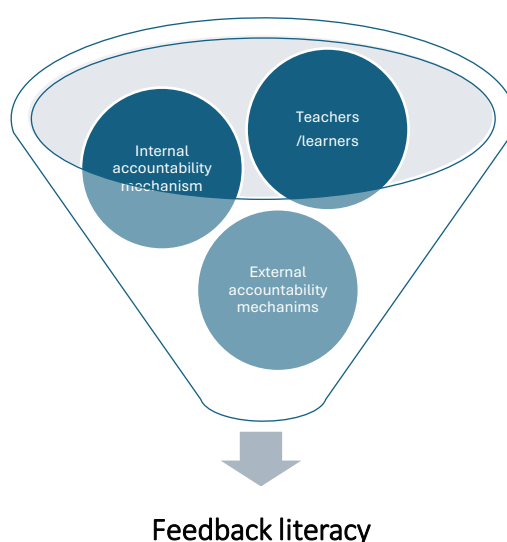


Figure 1. The Feedback Literacy Model

⁵ See also the EAT framework (Evans, 2016) in which assessment feedback is seen as one component of tripartite model that includes: Assessment Literacy, Assessment Feedback, and Assessment Design.

Unlike the hierarchical structure proposed by Mountford-Zimdars et al., the Feedback Literacy Model (FLM) in Figure 1 proposes that impactful feedback results from the interactions among various components working together as a cohesive whole. In this model, all participants have equal potential to either hinder or facilitate the delivery of quality feedback. This holistic approach to addressing the challenges of assessment feedback acknowledges the dynamic interdependencies among stakeholders and advocates for collaborative efforts to enhance feedback practices across all levels of the educational ecosystem. It is insufficient to solely promote the feedback literacy of teachers and learners; institutional cultures and accountability mechanisms must also evolve in alignment with contemporary educational research.

In this context, Winstone et al. (2024) propose that incorrectly framing items in student surveys can promote misconceptions about feedback. In a study of 10 national student satisfaction surveys, they found that the models of feedback depicted in these surveys are “outdated” in that they “promote a [...] view of feedback as information transmitted from teacher to student in a timely and specific manner, largely ignoring the role of the student in learning through feedback processes” (Winstone et al., 2024, p. 1524).

These claims are further validated by examining the student survey developed by the institution in this study. For undergraduate students, only two items addressed assessment feedback:

- My instructor provided timely feedback on tests and other assignments.
- My instructor explained how my work/performance was evaluated.

Similarly, in a student survey of 25 questions for postgraduate MA courses, only two items focused on feedback:

- Corrects the assignments and returns them promptly.
- Comments and suggestions on the returned materials were helpful.

As evidenced in the samples just shared and samples analyzed by Winstone et al., “the information processing model of feedback in which students have a limited role is still driving thinking within the field” (Van der Kleij, Adie, & Cumming, 2019, p. 319, as cited in Winstone et al., 2022, p. 1526). The risk of framing questions about feedback in this way is that it may send the wrong message to students, suggesting that “their role in feedback processes should be one of passive reception rather than active engagement” (Winstone et al., 2022, p. 1526). In this sense, policymakers play a crucial role not only in enacting policies that foster favorable conditions for providing quality and impactful feedback, but also “in seeking to align measurement tools such as evaluation surveys with the contemporary literature on educational effectiveness and scholarly understanding of feedback processes” (Winstone et al., 2022, p. 1534).

6. Limitations to This Study

This study operates at the intersection of theoretical exploration and empirical investigation, presenting potential limitations at both levels.

Firstly, the empirical strength of this study may be challenged by the relatively small, self-selected sample of 30 participants. A larger, randomly selected sample could enhance the reliability of theoretical interpretations and inferences drawn. However, it is noteworthy that the study’s elicited responses align with widely held assumptions across educational contexts in the US, UK, and Australia, thus largely mitigating this limitation.

Secondly, the FLM proposed lacks specific details on the contents of feedback literacy training programs. Future action-oriented research can draw upon existing works cited in this paper (e.g., Brookhart, 2017; Carless & Boud, 2018; Haughney et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2019; Nicol &

Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Winstone & Carless, 2020) to inform the development of comprehensive training modules.

7. Conclusion

This study offers educators a deeper insight into the complex ecosystem of assessment feedback, clarifying their roles within the feedback process and emphasizing the interconnected nature of these responsibilities. It encourages education research to move beyond simplistic, causal frameworks, advocating for a shift toward modelling the intricate, localized connections that link individuals, practices, and events across different organizational levels. As Mason (2010, p. 10) asserts, “coordinated changes throughout the educational system and its enabling contexts” are crucial, yet this view has been underrepresented in the assessment feedback literature.

While student-centred feedback models (Dawson et al., 2024) and “New Paradigm” models (Winstone & Carless, 2019) require either teachers or students to take primary responsibility, they often overlook the inherent complexity of feedback processes. Instead, the FLM promotes collaborative efforts among all stakeholders, underscoring the vital role of leadership, administration, and policymakers in setting realistic expectations and building a sustainable feedback system. This approach supports a more inclusive feedback environment that enhances the effectiveness of feedback practices.

Ultimately, the FLM advocates for a nuanced understanding of feedback, acknowledging the epistemological, psychological, and practical challenges that can inhibit its effectiveness. It reframes feedback literacy not only in terms of why individuals “would not” engage with feedback, but also why they “cannot.”

8. Suggestions

Based on the reported findings, several recommendations can be made to strengthen assessment feedback practices in HE. First, institutions should embed feedback literacy training into both faculty development programs and student curricula, ensuring that all stakeholders understand how to interpret, act upon, and sustain effective feedback practices. Second, institutional leaders and administrators should recognize that workload, research obligations, and administrative pressures are major barriers to quality feedback, and therefore allocate sufficient time and resources to support faculty in their assessment roles. Third, policies on quality assurance and accreditation should explicitly acknowledge feedback as a collective responsibility, moving beyond the narrow framing of feedback as a teacher–student transaction. Fourth, survey instruments and evaluation tools should be redesigned to reflect contemporary understandings of feedback as an ecological, interactive process, thereby avoiding outdated models that position students as passive recipients. Finally, it is recommended that HE systems adopt complexity-informed frameworks, such as the proposed FLM, which highlight the interdependence of teachers, students, administrators, and policymakers in creating a sustainable culture of effective feedback.

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