The nature of written feedback: A study of postgraduate lecturers' perspectives

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Abstract

Written feedback is a commonly applied method by which lecturers provide comments to students when a piece of work is assessed. The aim of this study was to capture the espoused views and practice of lecturers when providing written feedback, to ascertain the relationship between views and practice.

Using a qualitative methodology, this study explored the views and practices of lecturers who provide written feedback to postgraduate students on assessments. Eleven lecturers teaching postgraduate students within a social sciences faculty in a New Zealand tertiary institution participated in this study. Individual interviews were conducted to gain insight into lecturers’ espoused views on written feedback, and documentary analysis was carried out to explore written feedback practice.

One aspect that emerged from the study was the opportunity for lecturers to have a ‘voice’ and engage in discussion about written feedback. This has led to a recommendation for more dialogue around written feedback practice.

Key findings from the research study showed that lecturers believed:

- that the main role of written feedback was to improve students’ work;
- that attributing grades and providing feedback play a fundamental role in written feedback; and
- that their own individual style influences the written feedback they provide.

It was also found that:

- in certain aspects of written feedback, there are clear areas of alignment between what lecturers value and how they actually practice.

Recommendations from this study stem from the researcher’s belief, that a deeper understanding of what lecturers think about their written feedback is needed. In addition, the continued use of professional development opportunities to discuss written feedback amongst colleagues is warranted. New lecturers should have an induction and mentoring programme that has a specific emphasis on written feedback, so that written feedback is not lost in the broader topic of assessment.
Experienced lecturers should address their own written feedback practice through discussion within their academic programmes, providing examples and exemplars to model the diversity of effective written feedback practice.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the reasons for conducting this study and the significance of the topic. This research study captures the insights of a sample of lecturers’ perceptions of written feedback.

Rationale

Practical experience of being a lecturer, interest in students’ perceptions of written feedback and a realisation of the common understanding of other lecturers’ experiences of providing written feedback contributed to my interest in this topic.

The provision of written feedback to students by lecturers on an assessed piece of work is a time consuming task that involves the implementation of fundamental teaching practice to ensure the feedback is effective. Written feedback is regarded as a teaching tool to encourage further learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hyatt, 2005; Sadler, 1998).

Whilst a body of research exists that describes students’ perceptions of written feedback (Carless, 2006; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002; Holmes & Smith, 2003), “these perceptions are rarely compared to actual teacher feedback or teachers’ self-assessments of that feedback” (Higgins et al, 2002, p.83). Thus using a qualitative methodology, this study explored the views and practices of lecturers who provide written feedback to postgraduate students on assessments.

The consequence of effective written feedback is generally regarded as relating directly to student progress. Research suggests that students highly regard written feedback, most which encourages them to improve their work and motivate them in their study. Constructive comments by lecturers on how to improve work are also valued (Carless, 2006, Higgins et al, 2002). Brown and Glover (2006) assert that lecturers should follow practices that best encourage students’ learning. However, existing research does not make clear if lecturers’ espoused theory of teaching and learning align with their practice of providing written feedback, or, whether significant differences between their views and practice exist. The lecturers’ perspective is a largely uninvestigated area (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Bloxham, 2009). Consequently this exploratory study aimed to provide some insight into lecturers’ views of this phenomenon through exploration of their lived experiences.
There are many elements to assessment practice, with issues relating to each part of assessment. Within educational literature written feedback is embedded within a diversity of theoretical underpinnings and approaches around assessment. However, for this study a particular focus was placed on the written feedback provided by lecturers to students.

**Context**

The interviews were conducted with eleven participants from one urban tertiary institution in New Zealand. Classed as a large institution, three programmes within one faculty were chosen as the setting for the study. The eleven participants originated from across the three programmes (with a split of six, three and two). All of the participants regularly provide written feedback to postgraduate students on assessments. The detailed process for selection of the participants is given in chapter three. The context of the institution, its structure and policies were not explored as part of the study; the focus was on the views and individual practice of each lecturer.

**Assumptions**

Initially, the only assumptions of this study were that the lecturers’ role is to scaffold learning, rather than as merely a grader and responder to assignment work (Yorke, 2003). However, as the study progressed it became apparent that there may have been a tacit assumption about the lecturers’ views and practice. A further assumption was exploring what techniques are applied in practice. However, embedded in this view is the notion that, firstly effective practice can be defined, and secondly, that before practice can be explored, documenting what is actually happening in practice and the thinking behind this practice is the first key step.

While the aim of this study was to find out about written feedback practice, a greater achievement from this study could be to provide the lecturers with a ‘voice’ so that their experiences with written feedback could be heard.
Research aims and questions

This study was framed with the simple aim of revealing perspectives of what lecturers think about the written feedback they provide. The aim of this study is to capture the views and practice of lecturers when providing feedback; in essence, it is to capture their ‘voice’.

From this aim the following objectives were developed. These were to:

- examine lecturers’ views on fundamental practices related to the provision of written feedback;
- investigate lecturers’ views on written feedback to determine the relationship between espoused theory and practice; and
- identify some practices employed by lecturers when providing written feedback to postgraduate students.

In order to investigate the aims and objectives above, the following questions underpinned the research study.

- What are lecturers’ views on providing written feedback?
- What practices are employed by lecturers to provide written feedback?
- How do the views influence the teaching practice of lecturers in relation to written feedback?

Overview of this research

Mirroring the implementation of this research process the following chapters outline how the study was carried out and the thinking that influenced these actions. Each chapter forms part of the whole research study.

Chapter One provides a foundation for the research study by outlining the rationale, aims and research questions. The context and assumptions of the researcher are also explored, acknowledging that the researcher has a vested interest in this research study.
Chapter Two explores the key literature and research on the topic being studied, to provide an overview of the main areas to consider when exploring perceptions of written feedback.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology of this research study, which provides a framework and a guide for undertaking the research based on theoretical underpinnings.

Chapter Four outlines the findings and provides an analysis of the data of this study. A point of interest was the diversity of participants due to their experience as lecturers.

Chapter Five discusses the key themes that emerged from the findings to illuminate the essence of what lecturers think about written feedback and practice. I also relate the findings to literature on the topic.

Chapter Six draws conclusions from the findings and relates these back to the research questions. It also outlines recommendations for further research and summarises the limitations of this study.

In summary, by capturing each lecturer's perspective about their own written feedback it is hoped that this study will provide a stimulus for further discussion on the nature and practice of written feedback provided by lecturers.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses the literature related to written feedback practice, in particular literature that is directly associated to lecturers’ views and practice of written feedback. As the topic of assessment and feedback in general is vast, the focus of this literature review is on specific aspects of written feedback that relate to lecturer’s practice.

Introduction

Within the literature, the topic of assessment contains many components. One of these is feedback, with written feedback as a sub-component. The majority of the literature reviewed for the present study centered on written feedback and feedback comments.

Whilst a body of research has explored and described students’ perceptions of written feedback received from lecturers (Carless, 2006; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton 2002; Holmes & Smith, 2003), only a small body of research has explored lecturers’ views of the nature of written feedback (Maclellan, 2001). Some of these studies provide insight into lecturers’ perspectives as situated within a wider contextual framework such as gender (Read, Francis & Robson, 2005) and institutional structural constraints, such as timeframes and turnover (Bailey & Gamer, 2010). As the focus in the present study is based on lecturers’ espoused views and practice of providing written feedback, so this review of the literature endeavors to provide an underpinning theoretical perspective surrounding this particular practice.

In the literature a number of words are used to describe the lecturer. These include: ‘teacher’, ‘tutor’, ‘lecturer’ and ‘educator’. For the purpose of consistency I am using the word lecturer, as this is the term most commonly used for tertiary level teachers in New Zealand.

The following categories relevant to the review of literature on written feedback will be discussed under the following sub-headings:
- Written feedback – a teaching tool
- Lecturers’ practice in relation to theory
- Principles of effective written feedback
- Assessment cover sheets and rubrics
- The relationship between grades and written comments
- Specifics of written feedback
- Written feedback for improvement
- Lecturers’ views on written feedback

**Written feedback - a teaching tool**

A number of research studies regarding feedback assert that providing written feedback to students is in fact a component of teaching and learning in a co-constructive environment (Sadler, 1998; Yorke, 2003). When a lecturer provides written feedback on a piece of work, this is seen as teaching. More specifically, learning will occur when the student engages with this piece of written feedback. Therefore, the role of the lecturer in providing written feedback could be seen to place the lecturer in the position of co-constructor in the relationship between the lecturer (through the written feedback), the student and the course topic. Co-construction is the process by which students are able to construct knowledge out of their experiences (Brody & Davidson, 1998). The experience is engagement with the written feedback provided by the lecturer. The constructivist relationship in relation to written feedback is fundamental to the effectiveness of the learning process. In other words, based on constructivist principles when the student engages with the written feedback, it is assumed that learning is promoted.

Written feedback can be viewed as playing both a formative and summative role. The formative aspect is that the written feedback provides guidance to the student for future development of their work. The summative aspect is that the written feedback provides information on the level of performance, via the provision of a grade. In spite of the position of the assessment within the course, (whether in the middle or at the end of the course) there is general agreement in the literature that the written comments are formative feedback (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Brown & Glover, 2005; Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006).
Sadler’s (1998) writing about formative assessment draws on the work of Black and Wiliam (1998) to explain that when providing feedback “the role of the lecturer is to act as a mediator between, on the one hand, a body of knowledge and skills to be learned and, on the other hand, the learner” (p.2). Hyatt explains this concept further; “written feedback plays an important pedagogical role” (2005, p. 351). By this he infers that feedback assesses and facilitates learning. As Hyatt’s study was on academic language used in written feedback, he claims that feedback also plays a role in initiating students into the world of academic study, including academic language. Therefore, educationally, the gap between what is known and represented by the student, and what is being measured along with what the student has done ‘well’, must be the focus of the feedback for feedback to be effective (Black and Wiliam, 1998). However, the effectiveness of this approach is measured against ensuring that comments still contain the element of motivation for students. Therefore, feedback should be phrased in a constructive manner (what Read et al (2005) refers to as ‘sugar coated’) so as to be received by the student in a constructive way, and in turn, acted upon, thus enhancing learning and understanding.

**Lecturer practice in relation to theory**

As previously mentioned it could be argued that a role of the lecturer is to ensure that assessment feedback is fundamental to the teaching and learning process. Sadler (1998) proposes that lecturers should have a wealth of knowledge that underpins their practice which, taken together with institutional guidelines and criteria, should guide assessment and written feedback practice. He believes that these practices are also embedded within an individual’s approach to teaching and learning. However, Bloxham (2009) argues in relation to lecturer’s experience that “experienced assessors come to see themselves as expert markers”, yet “in reality experienced markers are no better than novice markers at applying standards consistently” (p.211).

A point useful to explore further is the issue of whether lecturers, (who are appointed on the basis of their content knowledge) have the skills required to give effective feedback. Can it be assumed that lecturers possess both content and teaching knowledge of their subject, as well as the skills and desire, and give feedback which is most likely to promote student’s learning? Storch and Tapper (2000) suggest otherwise, arguing that it is uncommon to find university lecturers who are content
specialists, who are skilled in written feedback pedagogy. “Tutors find it particularly difficult to respond to student writing, given their lack of training and experience as teachers” (p. 338). It is this position that creates a need to understand lecturers’ views on written feedback.

Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung (2007) argue that lecturers’ existing theories of practice also need to be acknowledged and challenged in order to bring about change in their own practice. Although usually implicit, lecturers’ have a rationale or belief system that underpins their practice; this rationale can be informed by their own theoretical knowledge. It is this theory that needs to be drawn on to either challenge or develop new theory. This understanding can be used as a platform from which to develop new theories of practice. In turn, Timperley et al (2007) believe that this may lead to enhanced practice and therefore improved outcomes for students.

“Appropriate feedback and highest quality feedback” (Ramsden, 1992, p.89) are key phrases that are highlighted in discussions on assessment practices, particularly with reference to written feedback. Appropriate written feedback through fundamental teaching practice may draw on many aspects of educational theory. Written feedback can also be used to provide lecturers with information about the quality of their teaching practice, based on what the students show they have learnt (Ovando, 1994). Thus providing both a formative and summative element to the practice. Perspectives surrounding how lecturers embed their knowledge of teaching into their written feedback are also debated. Ecclestone and Swann (1990), when discussing assessment policy, argue that “lecturers rarely receive formal induction into an assessment community” (p.378). This point relates to assessment as a whole, but can also be applied to lecturers learning how to provide written feedback. A proposed solution to this dilemma is more academic debate around assessment practices (Ecclestone & Swann, 1990). In technical terms a solution could also be that written feedback should contain, “less feedback on matters that teachers judge as important” and should focus more on a student’s learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2006, p. 402). Based on this principle, practices by lecturers who are aware of and who are capable of providing feedback effectively and constructively, are considered to be essential. In turn, the provision of effective feedback should result in lecturers’ reflecting on their own practice. To grow as educators this practice must be investigated. As Michael wrote, giving “feedback to students is not contentious. It is how we do it that still is” (2009, p. 7).
Principles of effective written feedback

Principles of effective written feedback practice have been suggested and outlined by many researchers (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Hand & Clews, 2000; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). Some authors consider implementing a standard set of principles to ensure written feedback is effective as rational teaching practice. Nevertheless Brown and Glover (2006) state that in relation to written feedback to students, “few attempts have been made to classify systematically the different types of teacher comments that constitute feedback so that the quality of feedback can be analysed” (p. 82). Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick’s (2006) developed “seven principles of good feedback practice” (p.199). These principles include, “clarifying what good performance is (i.e. the student must possess a concept of the goal or standard being aimed for), delivering high quality information to students about their learning, encouraging positive motivational beliefs and self esteem, and providing opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance” (p. 205). Although the present study does not purport to evaluate or measure the quality or suggested effectiveness of the written feedback given by lecturers, it is useful to review how effective feedback is described.

An outline of the conditions under which feedback is believed to influence learning has also been described in the existing literature (Gibbs, 2006). These conditions include, the quantity and timing of feedback (enough detail for the student, within a quick turnaround), and the quality of feedback (focus on the learning, is linked to the assignment and is understandable). Ovando (1994) identified the characteristics of constructive feedback to be “relevant, immediate, factual, helpful, confidential, respectful, tailored and encouraging” (p.21). Taken together, all of these authors go some way to providing guidelines on practice that may lead to the provision of effective feedback.

There is a larger body of work dedicated to exploring written feedback from a students’ perspective (Carless, 2006; Higgins et al, 2002; Holmes & Smith, 2003). A number of ways in which lecturers could improve their feedback has been suggested by Holmes and Smith (2003). These include: outlining clear objectives; the use of grading sheets; provision of thoughtful and constructive comments in an easy-to-read form; and the maintenance of objectivity. They also suggest that lecturers attend assessment workshops to understand the functions of written feedback.
Parker and Baughan (2009) conducted a study in a UK University that explored lecturer’s use of feedback characteristics after they had been taught optimal feedback characteristics in a professional development module. The authors explored whether the characteristics of lecturers written feedback were: specific and focused to the criteria; whether they justified marks with positive comments; identified areas to develop and steps to improve; were a certain length and volume; and if they were written to the audience (students). The results of the study showed a high correlation between learning that occurred from the professional development module and the practice exercise. This suggests that theory was translated into practice. The exception was the area of writing to the audience (students) and it was shown that most lecturers wrote in third person instead of directing their written comments personally to the student. A positive finding was that most lecturers identified areas for improvement, which were well covered in the written comments to the students. However, suggestions of how improvements could be made were largely absent in the written comments to the students. Unfortunately, there was no provision in the present study to ask lecturers for a rationale for their practice. For example, one lecturer provided no comments on the student’s script (assignment). In summary, there is a general consensus about some fundamental guidelines for effective feedback based on sound teaching and learning practice, and it is believed that if followed in practice, these promote best practice being implemented.

Assessment cover sheets and rubrics

It is generally argued that the assessment of a piece of work will always have some form of subjectivity. According to Read et al (2005), this subjectivity is acceptable as long as it is acknowledged that the “piece of academic writing cannot be objectively determined, as it is ultimately constructed by the assessor” (p. 242). When assessing, lecturers will usually provide written feedback in the form of either a self designed written feedback/cover sheet or use a rubric. A rubric is a “document that articulates the expectations for an assignment by listing criteria or what counts and describing levels of quality” (Reddy & Andrade, 2010, p. 435). Feedback may either be written directly on the piece of work, on a cover sheet, on a rubric, or a combination of these (Brookhart, 2008). A cover sheet can contain some or all of the following aspects: the learning outcomes; assessment questions; marking criteria; and allocation of grades to criteria. In addition, a rubric can be used as a cover sheet to provide a grade and comments, with the intention that the rubric assists by providing clear criteria to the student about expectations and providing a consistent marking guide. A rubric also typically outlines set criteria that are allocated to each
grade. A lecturer then assigns the degree of mastery of the task alongside the fixed criteria to determine the grade (Holmes & Smith, 2003). See appendix A for an example of a rubric taken from Reddy and Andrade (2010, p.436). This example is one way of presenting criteria in a rubric. There are now many different types of rubrics being used as written feedback.

Reddy and Andrade’s (2010) review of the literature on rubrics use in higher education discusses their use as a form of written feedback and alludes to the many different types of rubrics. The results of their review didn’t show whether a rubric used as written feedback aligned with effective feedback practice. However, they did find that students’ perception of the use of rubrics was that they provide clear and reliable assessment because the rubric makes the evaluation criteria transparent. This suggests that rubrics may have the potential to facilitate formative learning, if both the lecturer and student have a good understanding of how to interpret and apply the information provided in the rubric. Conversely, another finding from Reddy and Andrade (2010) suggested that there has not been enough research on rubrics to establish their quality as a teaching tool. They believe that in order to be used to facilitate learning through written feedback, it is essential that the rubrics be used in a way that extends past being merely an evaluation tool. That is, a rubric is accompanied by personalised written feedback comments.

The relationship between grades and written comments

The two major components of written feedback discussed and presented in the literature are the grade and the written comments (Maclellan, 2001; Rogoff, 2001; Sadler, 1998). These two areas are seen to be co-dependent and are viewed as traditional practice. However, there is some debate around the relationship and separating the two components. This debate is embedded in the role of summative and formative assessment (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006).

Some authors believe that separating grades from comments allows students to engage with feedback more effectively so that comments actively influence future learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Others assert that grades act as a reward to students, causing an emotional response rather than an engagement with the content of the written feedback (Sims-Knight & Upchurch, 2001). There is also a suggestion in the literature on the topic of a move away from grading and increased focus on written comments (Rogoff, 2001). For example, Rogoff (2001) suggested
the use of a system of narrative feedback and Yorke (2003) advocates more of a focus on formative assessment. Further research on this aspect of assessment is likely to further impact on the practice of written feedback practice.

Macellan’s (2001) study explored both student and lecturer perceptions of written feedback through the use of a large-scale questionnaire, with views obtained from 80 staff. The findings identified that the perception of the lecturer was that the primary purpose for assessment was to grade students’ work. Separating grades from feedback is an area that requires further exploration within the context of the role of written feedback. This context needs to consider the lecturer’s role as well as the teaching and learning occurring, including the place of formative assessment. Overall, irrespective of the style of cover sheet used, some standard characteristics of written feedback, such as a grade and written comments, are present and there is academic liberty on what and how written feedback is presented.

Specifics of written feedback comments

Two distinct categories of written feedback have been identified by Montgomery and Baker, 2007. These categories have been generally defined as feedback comments focusing on content/subject matter and those focusing on transferable academic skills (Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Ovando, 1994). Authors suggest that effective feedback is a balance of focus on both global issues (feedback on content) and local issues (feedback on organisation) (Montgomery & Baker, 2007). However, exploring how these two categories translate into actual practice raises issues related to lecturers’ espoused views and practice. A discrepancy between the amount of comments provided in each of these categories is highlighted. Montgomery and Baker’s study explored lecturers’ self-assessment of written feedback. Their study was conducted in an English Language Centre in a UK University. In practice they asked “do teachers focus their comments on the aspects of writing the way they believe they should?” (2007, p.86). The authors state that lecturers “underestimated the amount of feedback given on local issues and overestimated the amount of feedback given on global issues” (p.92). They went on to state that in relation to practice that, “helping teachers match their performance to their beliefs seems to be the next natural step” (p.96).

In an Australian University study, Storch and Tapper (2000) explored the purpose of assignments, from both lecturers’ and students’ perspectives. They examined
lecturers’ and students’ expectations of an assignment and then the relationship between these expectations and the actual feedback given. Their findings show that the lecturers paid more attention to mechanics (such as grammar and expression) than content. However, both students and lecturers predicted that content would be the focus of the feedback. Storch and Tapper’s study suggests that students need to understand that mechanics are an important aspect of the assignment. Additionally, they assert that lecturers who make a high number of comments focused on mechanics need to better support students to receive these in order for the comments to be meaningful. For example, explicitly indicating to the students that they will be assessed on grammar and expression. Storch and Tapper recommend that feedback should focus on content, and use of sources and structure, in that order, and that feedback should be presented through praise and advice.

In another Australian study, the focus of lecturer’s expectations raises similar issues. A research study by Bush (1997) stemmed from a need to provide information to lecturers working with foundation studies students about what lecturers expected in terms of assignment writing. Bush undertook a survey of 867 lecturers in four Australian Universities in order to explore their expectations of students’ assignments. Bush’s findings revealed that from a lecturers’ perspective, content was the most important aspect of assignments. Bush’s findings showed that “staff across the disciplines ranked content, argument, organisation, and communicative ability highest followed by the use of literature, grammar, style, vocabulary and punctuation” (p. 340) as important features of academic writing. Bush cautions that although there is some consistency about expectations, students still need to pay attention to the requirements of each assessment, and what is required in the assignment, which can vary considerably. These two studies (Bush, 1997; Storch & Tapper, 2000) are relevant to the present study in terms of their focus on the value lecturers place on comments related to technical and subject matter.

The order in which comments are provided within written feedback has also been alluded to as a key discussion point. Willingham (1990) discusses a hierarchy of comments, identifying that feedback should be structured by providing comments on content before comments on mechanics, while always ensuring that comments are provided to students on how to improve their work. This order impacts on the practicalities of how a written feedback sheet is laid out and the presentation of the written feedback. In other words, Willingham (1990) proposes that content should be the first area commented on followed by academic conventions such as referencing and presentation.
Overall, there is general agreement on the fact that written feedback should address both content and academic conventions. The ideal way in which this should be achieved in practice would be for the majority of comments to address the content or subject matter and only the minority of comments correcting academic nuances such as grammar and referencing.

While the literature above explored the types of comments in written feedback, studies have also investigated the language used within written feedback (Chanock, 2000; Hyatt, 2005). In addition to students not being able to read lecturers writing, the failure of students to understand what lecturers write on their essays due to their inability to comprehend the language used is thought to impact on the effectiveness of the written feedback (Chanock, 2000). For example, written feedback, which includes words that have an academic definition, such as the word analysis, can be difficult to understand. Authors suggest that these words need to have also been explored in another context, such as the classroom or an assessment guide, so that students are aware of the definition of the word in an academic context and how to achieve the desired outcome (Chanock, 2000; Lea & Street, 1998).

A study by Read et al (2005) that focused on the type of language used in written feedback, found that ‘negative’ comments were often intentionally pitched in a friendly manner to make them appear positive, so that the comments are encouraging and motivating for the student. Of particular interest to the present study is the awareness of the role of written feedback as a powerful mode of communication between the student and the lecturer. Written feedback may be more effective if there is a shared understanding of its nature and also highlights its potential to stimulate further academic discussion.

**Written feedback for improvement**

It is generally agreed that written feedback has the potential to be used as a vehicle to improve students’ future work (Carless, 2006; Higgins et al, 2002; Holmes & Smith, 2003; Willingham, 1990). There are two aspects to consider about how written feedback is used to improve work. One focuses on the use of written feedback to show how the student could have improved their work in the current assignment. The other focuses on written feedback that provides generic comments on how to improve work that can be applied to future assignments (Carless, 2006).
In a study of 460 staff and using a Likert scale of “never, rarely, sometimes, often, always”, Carless (2006) found that lecturers “often” provided feedback that helped students to improve their next assignment. This finding agrees with a study by Read et al (2005) which reported that five out of six lecturers indicated that they strive to provide comments that will improve student's work. However, the complex nature of this feedback technique is highlighted when students in the study indicated that they respond to the comments on the current assignment, but that they do not always comprehend the transferability of these comments for future assignments. Higgins et al (2002) claim that students want comments that will show how they could improve their assignment, explain their mistakes and identify how to improve the level of critical analysis in their current assignments. Unfortunately, the usefulness of written feedback to improve future work depends largely on the student's interpretation and ability to transfer these comments into future work.

**Lecturers’ views on written feedback**

Espoused theory relates to the premise that lecturers' views about written feedback are generated by their own ideas and experiences, forming the context from which the practice of providing written feedback to students is situated. In order to study lecturers' perspectives, the concept of espoused theory needs to be explored. The work of Argyris and Schon, 1974, (as cited in Ecclestone & Swann, 1999), forms the basis of ideas about espoused theory relating to the beliefs and assumptions that are made about a specific practice that forms the theory behind, or reasoning for, a particular practice. Jones (2008), who studied espoused theory to determine whether educational attributes, such as critical thinking, were valued by lecturers and implicit in their teaching practice suggested that “when asked about their behavior in a certain situation, people will respond with their espoused theory” (p.177). Hence, one’s own ideas and ideals influence practice, forming the crux of espoused theory.

Ecclestone and Swann’s (1999) study explores the relationship between a group of lecturers' beliefs (espoused theory) and practice. They gave a group of lecturers the opportunity to debate their beliefs about formative assessment and found that in an environment where educational beliefs are debated there was minimal discrepancy between espoused theory and practice. Therefore, the way a lecturer perceives their role will ultimately affect the written feedback that they produce, indicating that the lecturer’s role as provider, along with the purpose of, written feedback are areas that require ongoing pedagogical dialogue.
Espoused views are beliefs held by the lecturer about what they do in practice; in this study, they relate to written feedback. Espoused views can be explored by asking lecturers to describe their practice. Hand and Clewes (2000) used a questionnaire to survey 36 lecturers and asked them to describe the criteria they were using to assess a dissertation. Lecturers were able to articulate exactly what they were looking for, even though there were only rough generic guidelines for the lecturers to follow. This suggests that lecturers’ espoused views play a dominant role in their approach to written feedback and assessment. However, a limitation of Hand and Clewes’ study was that the lecturers’ espoused views were not compared to how they actually assessed the student’s dissertation. Consequently, the authors’ recommended that a study be performed which focused on whether lecturer judgments about what they are looking for, actually transfer into the grading and written feedback process. Similarly, Jones (2008) pointed out that it is essential to acknowledge espoused theory as a notion that influences studies of lecturers’ perceptions. Acknowledging beliefs is essential not only to ascertain what underpins lecturers' thinking, but also their practice.

Whilst the current study was being undertaken, Bailey and Garner (2010) were also performing a study to explore UK tertiary lecturers’ reflections on their practice. Their research study was of relevance to the present study due to the similarity of their focus; that being lecturers’ reflections on their practice. Their study, which included 48 university lecturers, examined how institutional structures, such as turnover timeframes, impacted on lecturers’ views of written feedback by capturing their conversational views on written feedback. Although this present study has not examined the institutional structures and New Zealand context of the lecturers’ workplace, Bailey and Garner’s study corroborates my view, that the topic of written feedback is an under-researched area, my rationale for exploring this topic. Their key findings suggest that “lecturers have varied perceptions and beliefs about the purpose of written feedback” (p.187). As suggested by Bailey and Garner the most important finding of their study was to highlight that institutional practices, such as turnover timeframes, make it difficult for lecturers to provide quality written feedback. Therefore, irrespective of the lecturers’ espoused view, reality may not support ‘best’ practice.

Bailey and Garner (2010) based their study on five very general questions about written feedback. One of their questions was, “what is the purpose of written feedback?” (p.190). Their aim was to provide a deeper understanding of the views
and beliefs of lecturers in relation to structural constraints surrounding the provision of written feedback. They found that lecturers believed that the purpose of written feedback was to facilitate learning. Other reasons for providing written feedback were to motivate students and to provide ‘feed forward’; that is, ways of improving work in the future. They also found that lecturers believed that not all students engaged with the feedback. Other findings from Bailey and Garner’s study showed that lecturers were aware that their written feedback was going to be read by both the student and the moderator. Additional factors that were highlighted in this study included, time restraints and language difficulties, (the lecturer sometimes tones down the language used so the students would better understand the feedback). Bailey and Garner (2010) suggest that most lecturers strive to provide effective feedback and use a variety of practices to present their written feedback. They state:

staff are increasingly under pressure to comply with institutional agendas at the departmental level and adopt practices such as structured forms often with little and insufficient internal discussion and deliberation about ‘best’ practice and fitness of purpose. (p.196)

Overall, Bailey and Garner’s study was particularly relevant as it provided some fundamental parallels with the present study.

Bailey and Garner (2010), when discussing lecturers’ views indicated that the lecturer was aware that more than one audience was reading the written feedback. One of these audiences is the moderator. Moderation is a process that ensures reliable standards are implemented in practice. Assessments are checked both internally, by another academic colleague within the programme, and externally when quality control is applied by an external body. Bloxham (2009) suggests that lecturers view moderation as a way of maintaining standards of work and ensuring students are marked fairly. In relation to written feedback and the point made by Bailey and Garner (2010) the moderation system can be viewed as a key aspect designed to ensure effective written feedback, by providing an avenue for written feedback to be verified by another source. The process of moderation should therefore provide a way of maintaining the effectiveness of written feedback.

Internal moderation is also of particular importance to the lecturers’ role in providing written feedback as the process of moderating an assessment allows insight into the ‘community’ of assessors. Bloxham (2009) states “that seeing others’ marking and discussing marking decisions can have an important role in staff development” (p.
For this reason Bloxham suggests that moderation allows lecturers to have a sense of self-assurance in the written feedback they are providing.

**Conclusion**

In summary it is evident that students' views regarding written feedback have been well documented and that the characteristics of effective feedback, although varied, have been widely studied and debated. How lecturers provide written feedback in practice is less evident across the literature. Furthermore, the reasons why lecturers provide written feedback in the way they do and their views on this practice seem to be taken for granted. There is an assumption that lecturers have been taught how to provide effective written feedback. An area where further alignment between what is espoused and what is happening in practice, requires further investigation.

Extensive literature on written feedback shows a distinction between two categories of feedback, that of subject and technical matter comments and how both types of these comments should be provided in effective written feedback. Overall, exploration of the complexities surrounding the provision of written feedback has drawn attention to the need for further investigation and debate around the subject in order to embrace the potential of the teaching task that every lecturer undertakes.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the methodology and research methods that underpin this research study and explores why particular methods were chosen as an appropriate means of answering the research questions. The process of data collection and analysis is also explained. Finally, triangulation is discussed along with ethical issues that were taken into consideration.

Introduction

An explanation of how this study is consistent in terms of the research problem, methodology and methods will be shown through discussion of the theoretical underpinnings that were considered throughout the whole research process. This methodological underpinning is a vital aspect of this study and provides a basis from which this study interweaves and forms a relationship between each part. As Creswell (2002) suggests, “to present the process as linear is too limited. Research has a beginning and an ending; individuals will cycle back and forth among the steps” (p. 8).

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was adopted to investigate the beliefs, understandings and behavior of the participants in relation to the specific educational practice regarding written feedback (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Furthermore, a qualitative approach was the basis from which “multiple meanings of individual experiences” (Creswell, 2002, p. 18) were made. In this case, it was the researcher’s aim to adopt a methodology that captured the essence of the interaction between the lecturer and their written feedback in order to further explore the phenomenon of espoused practice in relation to written feedback.

Qualitative research places value on the quality of the material collected in order to make meaning from the activities of a group of individuals (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Qualitative research also studies a range of data that provides insight into the activities people engage in in their lives. Furthermore, the qualitative researcher is guided by a desire to understand the perspective of the participants (Johnson &
Christiansen, 2008). These values have influenced this research study because the objective of this research was to draw heavily on the views of the participants being studied in order to make meaning of the lecturers’ perspective of written feedback.

Based on these values, Cresswell, (2002) provided a list of actions relating to a qualitative approach that was useful to this study. These actions were followed in this research study as a framework for ensuring the methodology aligned with the methods. These included: positioning oneself as the researcher by outlining the researcher’s position in relation to the topic; using interviews as a data gathering method to explore lecturers’ views on written feedback, thereby gaining participants’ meanings of the phenomenon; and interpreting the data using strategies that validate the accuracy of the findings. These are all features that are further explored in the description of the research methods.

As a novice researcher, I strived to ensure a good fit between the research topic and the chosen paradigm. This in turn provided a clear validation of the theoretical rationale to ensure the research study had strong and valid theoretical underpinnings. An interpretative paradigm was considered to be a valid approach for this research study because it embodied the key objective of the study, which is to gather a range of views from a group of people to make meaning of a particular phenomenon (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). A further objective was to capture the diversity of participants’ views, as a rich understanding is the intent of the study. It also allowed for the lecturers’ views to be the foundation of the analysis and discussion.

The main objective of an interpretive paradigm is to attempt to “understand the subjective world of human experience” (Cohen et al, 2000, p. 22). The essence is to extract meaning from this experience, to understand its complex nature. Following a qualitative form of research this study seeks an understanding of the world in which lecturers perceive written feedback, in order to develop subjective meanings of their experiences. These meanings are varied and complex rather than narrow (Creswell, 2002) as they rely as much as possible on the participants’ view of their experiences. Through discussion with lecturers about written feedback, construction of meaning of their perspective can occur. The intent of the data gathering and analysis is to interpret these meanings to develop a form of denotation. Hence, the focus is on interpreting and describing the data rather than the quantity of data.
In summary, the reason for embracing an interpretive paradigm in the present study is its appropriateness in acknowledging the perceptions and experiences of lecturers, to allow for views to be explored and compared, to make meaning of their notions about written feedback.

**Researcher context**

A qualitative approach relies on the researcher acknowledging their own experiences and background (Creswell, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Knowledge, experience and the mere fact that the researcher is interested in the topic influenced the views of the researcher on the topic being studied. Three personally driven assumptions influence my view as the researcher on why I elected to research perspectives of written feedback. The first of these was my own experience receiving written feedback as a student studying an undergraduate degree in the 1990’s. The study by Higgins et al (2002) on student’s understanding of feedback found that 97% of students read the written feedback they received. I however, only checked the grade. Later in my teaching career I became a lecturer and was mentored on the skills of giving written feedback to students. My interest was aroused again when I discovered that a large body of research has described students’ perceptions of written feedback received from lecturers (Higgins et al, 2002; Carless, 2006; Holmes & Smith, 2003), yet little research has explored lecturers’ views of the nature of written feedback.

**Description of participants**

Eleven lecturers teaching postgraduate students within a social sciences faculty in a New Zealand tertiary institution participated in this study. This study used typical case sampling, (Wellington, 2000) whereby a representative sample of lecturers who were able to provide relevant information about written feedback and met the topic and focus being studied were approached as possible research participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Lecturers who teach at postgraduate level within the Institution and who provide written feedback at postgraduate level were invited to participate in the study. Feedback at postgraduate level was chosen because narrowing the focus to postgraduate lecturers provided a way of deepening the attention to the written feedback they provide, rather than widening the breadth of focus across all levels of study. In order to gain access to participants, one Faculty
was used. Therefore, all departments within the Faculty that teach Social Sciences (except The Education Department, due to personal affiliations) were approached. Recruitment of participants takes into consideration drop off rate and therefore a higher number of participants were invited to take part in the research study than the number of actual participants who agreed to be part of the study.

The context in which this study took place resulted in certain parameters to the research study. Time restraints were a factor in the research study, as just one researcher conducted the study. Access to participants was another aspect to consider. The focus on postgraduate lecturers was also a factor to consider, due to this focus narrowing the number of possible participants. These parameters influenced the research design but also aligned the methodology with practice by positioning the researchers context within the research design (Creswell, 2002).

Initial contact with potential participants was made via permission and communication with the Programme Directors in the related Faculty. (See appendix B for contact letter). The potential participants were emailed the information sheet about the research study by their Programme Director, which asked them to contact the researcher if they were interested in taking part in the study. (See appendix C for information sheet). The participants responded via email directly to the researcher indicating their interest in the study. (See appendices D and E). The confirmation letter provided details about the interview and outlined some ethical practices that were implemented in the research. The ethics related to this study are described later in this chapter. All of the interviews took place in a setting of the lecturer’s choice. The lecturer’s opted to use their offices as the interview setting, as appointment times could be arranged around their working schedules. The response rate was high with eleven participants interested and the general enthusiasm towards the study by the programme directors was encouraging. Contacting participants in this manner was carefully thought through, to show respect towards participants and programme directors and uphold ethical considerations such as being well informed about the purpose of the research.

In summary, a total of eleven participants took part in the study and provided time for the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews. Participants were drawn from three different programmes from the Faculty of Social Sciences, and two were male. Six
lecturers from one programme, and two and three lecturers from the other two programmes participated in the study.

**Data collection methods**

In line with the qualitative approach, which is the foundation of this study, two methods of data collection were used to provide differing perspectives on the topic of study. The methods of data collection used in this study are interviews and documentary analysis. Referring back to Creswell’s, (2002) actions related to a qualitative approach, the use of interviews as a data gathering method to explore lecturers’ views on written feedback, thereby gaining participants’ meanings of the phenomenon were employed.

**Semi-structured individual interviews**

In order to explore the participants espoused views and to gain a deep understanding and detail about their views on written feedback, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted. This method aligned with the type of data needed to be collected to meet the methodological approach of gathering rich, deep data. The use of interviews enables a large amount of data plus opinions, beliefs and feelings to be collected (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen, 2006). The use of interviews also allowed participant’s views to be clarified and immediately explored because of the one-to-one nature of the conversation (Creswell, 2002).

The interview guide approach (Johnson & Christensen, 2008), using an interview schedule was applied to this study. This approach meant that participants were asked a similar set of questions, but allowed the responses to be of an open nature. Questions were then able to be adapted as the research topic was explored. Adaptation of questions allowed areas of the topic that the participants identified as important to be investigated further. The review of the literature revealed some key themes that guided the content of the interview schedule. These themes were also connected with the research questions and objectives, and provided a framework to explore lecturers’ espoused views and practice. As the process unfolded I realised that some of the questions became irrelevant as the interviews went on. For example, the question “tell me about what you currently mark” elicited an answer that told me what papers in the programme the lecturer marked. Although setting a
context, this generalised information was already being drawn, so the question was deleted from the interview schedule after the first few interviews. In addition, some questions were added to the interview schedule as the first few participants alluded to areas that I had not considered, such as consistency around marking, which ended up drawing out valuable information in the findings. This participant inclusive practice aligned with the qualitative methodology this study has adopted through a commitment to understand the perspective of the participants. The interview data was strong and the interviews were kept effective by employing the strategy suggested by Hinds (2000) to keep the conversation flowing.

The interviews were a way of gaining individual responses to the participants’ perceptions of written feedback and the interview schedule questions were an adaptation of some of the concepts found in the literature. One of the questions in the interview schedule included a researcher-generated set of characteristics that are used in common practice in written feedback. Brown and Glover (2006) believe that it is difficult to systematically classify different types of feedback. Therefore, for this study I developed a set of characteristics based on common practice that relate to both subject matter and technical comments, and that could be observed in practice. (See appendix F for an example of a response to the list of characteristics provided to each lecturer to comment on). The characteristics are highlighted in black as they formed part of the discussion.

Two questions in the interview schedule proved problematic. Firstly, the question relating to a particular approach or theory was answered with trepidation by participants and should have had a lead-in sentence explaining that there is no particular theory related to effective written feedback practice, but did they draw on any educational theory. Secondly, the question that related to the differences between formative and summative written feedback could have been worded differently as an assumption was made about the clarity of these two definitions. Most of the participants answered this question by analysing whether they provide formative or summative written feedback. There was a general consensus that most assignments are summative, except for written feedback on a thesis.

The use of a digital recorder in the interviews allowed for full transcripts to be analysed. This eliminated some researcher bias by providing an accurate record of the conversation (Creswell, 2002). However, it is acknowledged that transcribing data from the spoken to written form can change the meaning (Cohen et al, 2000). The researcher's impression of the conversation is recognised as an important part of the
process and the transcript was continually revisited. In addition, direct quotes were used from the text.

Documentary analysis

Documentary analysis was the second type of data collection employed in this study. Documents are texts that represent the thoughts of the individuals on the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2002). In this case the documents in the form of written feedback provided to students, provided a vital source of information to study the relationship between espoused views and practice. Ary et al (2006) describes the advantage of documentary analysis as being “unobtrusive where the presence of the observer does not influence what is being observed” (p. 465).

Participants were asked to provide a sample of their written feedback to a student for use. Written feedback generally consisted of the student’s assignment with comments written on it. Any cover sheets that were used and the written feedback given to the student with the returned assignment were also collected. These documents are classified as both public and private (Creswell, 2002) because an individual writes them privately, yet they are open for public scrutiny because they are part of an organisational structure. Privacy issues surrounding the release of these documents for documentary analysis were measured as part of the ethical considerations and are outlined later in this chapter.

The eleven participants provided varying models of written feedback for documentary analysis depending on what they had kept as copies. The samples of written feedback varied in style from the assignment with comments plus a separate sheet of written feedback to a rubric with comments. All participants provided a sample of written feedback but only five participants provided a copy of the student assignment. However, the gathering of this type of data is of particular relevance to the study and directly related to the research questions due to it’s capacity to make links between espoused theory and practice. The compromise was to gain as much documentation as possible without eliminating the participant from the study. In essence this meant that some of the documentary analysis is not as robust as it could have been.
Data analysis

The qualitative methodology of this study leads to using an interpretive approach to data analysis. Data analysis was therefore driven by the goal of interpreting and understanding the findings in a way that gives meaning to the participants’ perspectives. This practice upholds the actions outlined by Creswell (2002) as relevant to a qualitative approach, which formed a foundation of the methodology of this study.

Constant comparative method

The constant comparative approach evolved out of the work by Glasser and Strauss (Merriam, 1998) on grounded theory as a way of comparing data to build concepts about a phenomenon of study. The constant comparative approach has been adopted by many qualitative researchers who are not necessarily building a theory (Merriam, 1998). That is, an understanding of a phenomenon can develop without a new theory having been established.

In this research study data were analysed using the constant comparative approach. The analysis phase of the study consisted of organising and synthesising the data with the aim of interpreting the findings to identify key themes. The chosen method allowed analysis of the data to start from the very first interview and continued up until the transcripts had been transcribed and more in-depth analysis had begun. It allowed interaction with the data in order to continually question, think about and revisit it to make meaning about the experiences described by the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Themes emerged as the data were collected and recurring themes were identified. The constant comparative method allows each category to be compared as categories are added and sub-categories are formed (Merriam, 1998). In the current study, using an interpretive approach the categories appeared as themes. As each piece of data from each question was sorted and ordered, themes appeared which were compared and contrasted throughout the analysis and then related to the literature. A summary of the data was then prepared from which further interpretations were made.

The audio tapes and notes from the interviews were transcribed. As an independent researcher, the use of long table analysis was a practical option to delineate the
process of analysis. Roughly following Krueger and Casey’s (2000) outline, each transcript was alphabetically and colour coded and set out on a board. (See appendix G for a photo picture of the start of this process). Each question was analysed and as themes emerged they were compared and contrasted throughout the process. In order to ensure a holistic view of the data was captured, application of the model of analysis outlined by Krueger and Casey (2000) in which frequency, specificity, emotion and extensiveness were key objectives, were used to review the data. For example, most of the participants replied with the same answer to one of the questions. This is an example of frequency occurring when analysing the data. Therefore, themes were organised through a process of investigating points that were discussed frequently across interviews, points that were inherent within the discussions along with pertinent and collaborating points of view. The theme headings are ordered and presented in a way that illustrates the dominance of the views of the participants. For example, discussion of how written feedback is used to improve students’ work was frequently talked about in the interviews, indicating that this was a key finding. Ary et al (2006, p.500) state that “the process of interpreting the data requires confirming what is already known, questioning what is known, eliminating misconceptions and illuminating new insights and important things that you did not know but should have known”. These guidelines were used as a general guide in the analysis of this research.

Lofland (2006) argued that separating data may obscure the context of the data and the general meaning as a whole. Therefore, an additional copy of the complete transcribed interview was referred to as the analysis took place and themes were summarised in the findings. In addition, the typing of the transcripts enabled the recollection of the whole conversation with each of the participants.

Analysis was also carried out on each piece of written work to reveal similarities and differences between espoused theory and practice. Analysis of the written comments by lecturers involved aligning themes that emerged from the interviews and comparing these with practice. Johnson and Christensen (2008) suggest the use of a classification system to break something down into different types or kinds to help make sense out of qualitative data. One of the questions in the interview schedule drew on the concepts of a study by Montgomery & Baker (2007), which discussed the use of global and local feedback. This study is outlined in the literature review in chapter two. These concepts influenced the development of a self made (researcher driven) set of practice characteristics related to written feedback. These practice characteristics were then used in the interview and documentary analysis. Two sets
of data were collected: one for lecturers’ espoused views and another for their practice. When a relationship between two sets of data requires exploration, a visual comparison is an effective tool to aid analysis (Lofland, 2006). A visual comparison was made using a table and a histogram. This highlights similarities and differences in the data, and demonstrates the degree of correlation between the lecturers’ espoused views and their practice.

A ranking system was also applied to the data to show which characteristics were most valued. Ranking was carried out as follows. If nine out of the eleven participant responses said reflective questions were valued, this characteristic was ranked in relation to the other characteristics. One is ranked as the most valued characteristic.

Inferences were made when analysing the qualitative data. In applying a constant comparative approach, any inferences made from the data were cross-checked with the transcript of the whole interview to ensure that any assumptions made on the part of the researcher held the correct meaning. This was useful because the transcribed data could be continually revisited to ensure that the meaning was clearly understood. This was also achieved by using low inference descriptors. Low inference descriptors are used so that a person reading the study can experience the participants’ actual language (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Low inference descriptors (Ary et al, 2006) were used when writing up the findings, in other words direct quotations, so that the reader can experience the participants’ own words and understand their meaning. This allows the researcher’s judgment of what has been said to be checked. Once the data had been interpreted, further links were made back to the literature on the topic, which is presented in the discussion of the findings.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation is a practice in which two or more methods of data collection are used to inform the results of a study. Overall, the aim was to “relate different sorts of data in ways that counteract possible threats to validity” (p. 319). Triangulation allows data to be collected and viewed from more than one viewpoint. Denzin (1997) states that “interpretations that are built upon triangulation are certain to be stronger than those that rest on the more constricted framework of a single method” (p. 319). Triangulation was carefully considered for this study and types of triangulation measured for their potential to make the study more robust. Triangulation, through
the use of two data collection methods was employed to validate the findings of this research study. The data collection methods in this study are interviews and documentary analysis. Reflexive triangulation was also achieved by reflecting on my own position as the researcher, (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, cited in Denzin, 1997) as outlined at the beginning of this chapter in the researcher context section. McTaggart (1997) stated that the intention of triangulating data is to gain a deeper understanding of data, rather than applying just one interpretive framework. It is the application of these methods that ensures similarities and differences are recognised and understood.

Correlation of findings from both the interviews and the documentary analysis occurred from which validation of the findings could transpire. For example, findings from the interviews identified some key features of written feedback, such as a grade and written comments. These characteristics then provided an overlay for the documentary analysis. Other examples of this correlation include, findings from the interviews related to characteristics lecturers believed were valued in written feedback were related to the practice they displayed in their written work. Findings also corresponded with themes from the literature. For example, Montgomery and Baker’s (2007) study using the terms global issues and local issues were related to lecturers comments pitched at content, and comments that were general structural comments. These then were used to support the findings of the current study.

**Ethics**

Following the ethical guidelines of the institution, each lecturer received an emailed information sheet via their programme leader inviting them to participate in the study. Participants volunteered to be part of the study and provide their time for the interview. The information sheet outlined procedures for maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. All eleven participants consented to participate by signing a consent form. (See appendix H for the consent form). The institutions' Department of Education was excluded from the study due to a potential conflict of interest; due to personal affiliations.

Effective research practice ensures the identity of participants remain anonymous. Johnson and Christiansen believe that “privacy is at the heart of the conduct of ethical research” (2008, p.119). The data from this research study was alphabetically coded to remove the identities of participants and any statements that could be contextually linked back to participants have not been used. This practice can be
seen in the findings chapter where a letter code is attributed to each participant so that voices of the participants can be contained whilst still assuring anonymity. In addition, practices such as the right to withdraw, confidential storage of data and gaining permission from academic supervisors to use copies of students’ assignments were employed. In this study, to show that participant involvement was valued, each participant was asked if they would like a copy of the abstract when the study was complete. All eleven lecturers were interested in and took up this offer. When collecting data from participants, awareness of power relations needed to be acknowledged as a possible influence on the interaction between the researcher and the participants. Johnson and Christensen (2008) believe that the researcher is often viewed as an expert. Therefore, an awareness of this dynamic, especially when participants were discussing their perspectives, was essential. In order to alleviate any concerns, a brief introduction including the reason for conducting the study, was given at the beginning of the interview. This strategy appeared to minimise any discomfort, as participants appeared trusting and commented with honesty. It is believed that the open dialogue that occurred would not have taken place if the participants felt the researcher was judging them. Participants were sent a copy of the interview schedule before the interviews took place and were also given the chance to revisit their interview by reviewing the transcripts to give them the opportunity to clarify and further explain their perspective and overall impression and in an attempt to alleviate researcher bias. Participants were also asked if they would like a copy of the abstract when the study was completed to ensure the participants felt valued and acknowledged as a key part of the study. All of these ethical practices uphold the standards of the ethics committee that approved the research study.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the methodology chapter not only frames the research study but explains how each of the fundamental aspects were recognised in many layers throughout the process of conducting the study. Lincoln and Guba stated that “no method can deliver on ultimate truth…but some methods are more suited than others” (2005, p.205). In this study, every effort has been made to ensure that an appropriate methodology has been chosen, rationalised and effectively implemented to achieve a robust outcome.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter outlines the findings of the research study and the themes that emerged from analysis of the data. A discussion of the findings will be presented in the next chapter.

Introduction

Overarching the findings are the key questions related to this research study. They address the espoused views, practice and the relationship between the espoused views and practice of the lecturer in relation to written feedback. In the following chapter the key themes that arose as findings from the study will be outlined under the following sub-headings:

- Purpose of written feedback
- Types of written feedback
- Self development of written feedback
- Relationship between espoused views and practice
- Views on grades

Purpose of written feedback

The first theme investigates how written feedback is viewed as a means to improve students’ work. The findings outline the purpose of written feedback, what students learn from written feedback and the link between the lecturers’ views and practice.

All eleven lecturers had a positive reason for providing written feedback and six lecturers held the view that the central role of written feedback is to improve students’ work. This reasoning is encapsulated in the belief that learning is occurring.

“I think the main role is so that the students can improve on what they’ve… what standard they submitted that piece of assessment to” - participant K.

“I think written feedback is to give the students an opportunity to learn how to improve” - participant E.
“I think the main role is to support students learning process. To help them with the next assignment or the next version of what they’re going to be doing” - participant C.

Data gathered from the interviews also indicated that eight out of the eleven participants believed that grades were interlinked with the written comments; believing that there is the potential to use written feedback to improve work, to increase a student’s chances of getting a better grade. Hence, the relationship between written feedback, feedback for improvement and the allocation of a grade was highlighted.

“They want to be rewarded for hard work by getting good grades. If they’re not on the right track they like to know where they got lost so they can improve. On the other hand some students don’t even read your comments” - participant D.

“Two things for me; one is to build students confidence…; the other is to identify areas where they could have improved their grade. Like the gaps and things like that” – participant H.

Students’ learning from written feedback

The main role of written feedback identified by lecturers was to improve a student’s work.

“It’s the hope that we identify gaps that next time they do an assignment they’ll actually do a bit better” - participant H.

“Well, I’m hoping they would learn sort of where they’ve missed the mark. Perhaps how they might improve. And I’ve certainly been lucky enough to have students that…, I have noticed them improve so I guess that’s some proof to say well I must be doing something right, surely” - participant K.

Improving students’ work was identified by six of the participants as the main aim of written feedback, but was dependent upon the student engaging with the comments. However, one lecturer outlined their perspective of what students do when they do not engage with written feedback. This comment is related to the grade, and the lecturer believed that many students’ may not even be interested in the written feedback.
“Some learn nothing because they don’t take it on board, they don’t read it, they’re not interested, they want their mark and they’re not interested in learning from it. The ones who want to do better, I think, do genuinely take on board your comments. Even if it’s playing the political game of knowing how to get more marks. It’s not really a deep learning its playing a game. But good on ‘em really. It’s about a course and getting a mark. That’s fine” – participant J.

Views on improvement

As outlined in the methodology chapter, one of the questions in the interview schedule included a researcher-generated set of characteristics that are used in common practice in written feedback.

The table below shows a ranking of the most valued characteristics of written feedback.

Eleven of the participants stated in their interviews that providing written feedback about how to improve work was valued and important.

Table 1. Most valued characteristics of written feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 = most valued</td>
<td>Strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Opening and closing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 =</td>
<td>Supporting evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Learning outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 =</td>
<td>Overall presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 = least valued</td>
<td>Justification for the grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After applying the ranking system to each participant’s views on valued characteristics, it can be seen that providing comments on areas for improvement in the written feedback was ranked number one, along with commenting on strengths and providing reflective questions.
Practice related to comments for improving work

The documentary analysis, showed whether comments on how to improve the students work were evident in practice. Comments on improvements in the documentary analysis is defined as any written comments either on the assignment or in the written feedback that point to a way the student could improve their work. For example:

“… more in text references needed to validate your claims, discussion” - participant B

Analysis of each participant’s view on whether comments on improvements were a valued aspect of written feedback was compared to the data from their practice, i.e. the piece of written feedback that was provided for analysis.

Table 2 shows that seven pieces of written feedback from the eleven participants included comments about improvements, but four pieces did not. The results also indicate that seven out of eleven participants’ views correlated with their practice. That is, seven participants stated that providing feedback on how to improve work was important and this was also shown in their practice. A high correlation between views and practice.

Table 2. Comments on improvements - views and practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Comments on improvement were not viewed in practice – documentary analysis</th>
<th>Comments on improvement were viewed in practice – documentary analysis</th>
<th>Said that comments on improvement are important - interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These findings, which identify one of the key reasons for providing written feedback is to improve students work leads into the next section, which will explore how written feedback was provided through a range of styles.

**Types of written feedback**

The following section will explore the styles of written feedback provided, how pieces of written feedback were chosen for documentary analysis, consistency within the provision of written feedback, lecturers’ experiences, and the need for academic dialogue about written feedback.

**Explaining one’s own style**

The interview data showed there are many styles used to provide written feedback. These styles include a collaboration of all or some of the following elements: written comments on the assignment; a separate page of written comments; rubrics; track changes; and ticks on assignments. When asked to describe how they provide written feedback, the responses indicated that each lecturer provided written feedback based on their own personal view of how it should be presented. The exceptions were two programmes that were using a generic rubric. A rubric is a summary sheet that outlines the learning characteristics of each grade related to the learning outcomes. Five out of the eleven participants interviewed used rubrics as a style of written feedback. The rubric was sometimes accompanied with an extra feedback comment sheet. Participants described in detail how they provide written feedback:

“… the lecturer who I’d taken over from had developed a sort of template because he found when he was marking he was using the same sort of words for things. And basically I use the headings to match up with what they were getting marked on here so they could cross reference the numbers to mean something” - participant E.

“Normally just hand written but sometimes typed at the end of the paper. It’s a blank piece of paper and I’ll write out the marking criteria subheadings and insert comments based on the marking criteria” - participant G.

“There’s a little summary in the front and there’ll be little summaries in the section part as well. All track changes (Microsoft Word editing tool). I sometimes use model answers and give them what the model answers looks like and concentrate on the
marking on the extent to which they’ve sort of got there. At times I’ve given a mark for each section. In the front here they’ve got a small overall summary with a grade” - participant B.

Samples of written feedback provided

The aim of this part of the study was to collect examples of written feedback that were a close representation of actual practice. The samples of work the lecturers provided for analysis were selected by the participants. Six lecturers did not have a student script to provide with the written feedback and others had thought about providing positive examples of written feedback.

“Well it’s just gone back today. So it’s just a quick flick of a random…” - participant I.’

“I wanted to give you a range. I went into my box and I’d saved some. There are two different courses there” - participant D.

Consistency – personalised compared to standardised approach

The documented evidence showed some consistent aspects related to written feedback. These were the provision of comments and a grade. However, there were variations in the stylistic form lecturers employed in the written feedback, in other words how these aspects were presented.

It soon became evident as the interviews progressed that consistency amongst lecturers was an area that required additional investigation. These reflections led to the addition of a question to the interview schedule; this was included in nine out of the eleven interviews. The additional question was related to consistency across courses and programmes, and whether there should be a standardised form of written feedback.

“I think that course content varies and structure styles vary. But there should be allowance for huge variation around how written feedback is actually provided. I think there should be some consistency about how much is written. There should be a baseline, yes” - participant C.

“Well, I think sometimes it can be confusing for students because there’s no consistency. But on the other hand I think it’s important for lecturers to have their own
intellectual freedom and their own style. And not everyone’s style is perfect. There are lots of different ways of providing assessment” - participant D.

The responses to this question were overwhelmingly consistent. Nine participants wanted academic freedom to provide written feedback in a way in which they believed best suited their teaching and course, within the context of the academic requirements. Additionally, when asked about what improvements could be made to written feedback one participant indicated that consistency in the provision of written feedback across a teaching team would be advantageous.

“I guess thinking about a new programme I’d really like to see a little more consistency across all the teaching team and the courses about how we assess” - participant A.

Academic dialogue about written feedback

Given the strong indications discussed above about the need for academic freedom, it was interesting to note that four comments from the participants related to the need for academic conversations surrounding written feedback. This suggests that although lecturers would like to provide written feedback in their own way they would like to talk about written feedback with others.

“What I would say overall is that I think it would be really valuable for there to be more reflective conversation, peer conversation, about written feedback. Colleague to colleague, among tutors. What is the purpose of written feedback? What do you think about written feedback? What are the roadblocks that you encounter when you’re working with written feedback? What do you think the students will get out of it?” - participant C.

“...maybe institutions have a responsibility to make that part of our culture, that we actually discuss and think about and are exposed to some of these things [written feedback] instead of leaving it as under the carpet stuff” - participant I.

Samples of written feedback

Documentary analysis of the samples of written feedback showed a range of styles, all of which aligned with the descriptions the lecturers had given of how they provided written feedback in the interviews. The samples of written feedback varied from a
copy of the student assignment (with comments plus a separate sheet of written feedback), to a rubric with comments. All lecturers except for one wrote comments on the student’s script (including electronic track changes). The lecturer who chose not to write on the students’ script rationalised their reason as follows.

“It’s a belief thing. I don’t like scribbling on students’ work. I think that their work is their work. And scribbling on it somehow [pauses] there is something in me that prevents me from doing that”- participant F.

In summary, it is acknowledged that lecturers use a range of styles to present their written feedback and it would appear they are comfortable with the written feedback they provide on an individual basis. An indication of the need for academic dialogue about written feedback draws attention to the rationale behind why the lecturers provide written feedback in the way that they do. These findings led to the next section, which explores the reasoning underpinning lecturers’ particular styles of written feedback.

**Self development of written feedback**

To gain an understanding of the experiences that influenced lecturers’ views of the written feedback they provide and try to draw out a rationale for practice. I asked how lecturers learned to provide written feedback.

Five participants reported that they had learnt written feedback skills in an experimentally, contextually developed way, and three said that they had no formal training. The conclusion is, therefore, that the majority of lecturers learnt to provide written feedback by “trial and error”. While this was the case in the present study, it should be noted that this finding needs to be considered in relation to the small sample size and cannot be generalised across the whole lecturing profession.

“I didn’t have any formal training in it. I’ve learnt on the job. Self-taught. However, I guess I could say I’ve got a background ...(participant refers to academic discipline) and so I would hopefully not be too negative, but constructive”- participant B.

“We learn just by trial and error often. You really are just thrown in the deep end, given a set of papers to mark and you haven’t really got a clue. It really wasn’t until we used to sit round doing the moderation afterwards and check all the grades that we picked up if we were at the right pitch”- participant D.
"Well I learnt basically by doing it" - participant E.

"Trial and error. I don't even know if what I'm doing now is right, to be honest. Because there's nobody telling you" - participant K.

Two participants said that they drew on their background of teacher training and two others commented that they had had work cross marked by other lecturers. These findings indicate that these lecturers were not involved in a standardised way of training lecturers in how to provide written feedback.

Experience compared with learning

The experience of lecturers ranged from 1 year to 27 years, indicating a diverse range of experience. Using the data obtained about the number of years a lecturer had been teaching and correlating this data with how each lecturer said they learnt to provide written feedback, it can be seen that all of these lecturers had little training in how to provide effective written feedback.

Table 3. Experience of lecturers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Number of years teaching experience</th>
<th>How participant learnt to provide written feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>“Experience”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>“Mentoring plus teaching qualification”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>“No formal training”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>“No formal training – experience”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>“Made it up”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>“Made it up”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>“Doing it – double marking”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>“No formal training, have a teaching qualification”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>“Trial and error”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>“Trial and error”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>“Cross-marking”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear from the interview data that trial and error, and experience was the most commonly used method, used by the participants to learn how to provide written feedback. In addition, some used elements of general knowledge about teaching and
learning. Furthermore, the participants’ responses suggest that the number of years of teaching experience appears to have had no influence on how a lecturer learnt to provide written feedback.

Approach

The word ‘approach’ became a participant-developed definition related to a feeling-driven method of providing written feedback. For example, when the lecturers were asked if they had a particular approach or theory that they used to provide written feedback, they drew heavily on their own ideas and beliefs about what they thought would be a good approach to take to make the written feedback effective. Nine participants identified that they use no particular approach or theory to providing written feedback, with two participants identifying that they have received formal training and read about assessment to inform their practice. The participants elaborated on these comments with one participant referring to a student-centred approach and two participants acknowledged a positive approach. Two participants had based and continued to base their practice on the written feedback they would like to receive as a student.

“I’m not working to a theory that I’m connected to. I’m probably drawing on how I like to be given feedback” - participant I.

‘No, I don’t have any theories of teaching and learning that I’ve rattled out. I’ve done some general reading and teaching and learning workshops. Basically a student-centred approach” - participant C.

“… no I haven’t read a lot on it [theory] I must say. I would say that, firstly, you want to motivate your students, you don’t want to humiliate students, you don’t want to make them feel bad about what they’ve tried to do, on the whole” - participant B.

Identifying the lecturers’ approaches to written feedback allows some insight into how each lecturer has developed their own style of written feedback.

Rubrics

The use of rubrics was the closest example of the consistent use of a style of written feedback evident in the lecturers’ practice.
"We did an assessment project... our team had identified that assessment was an area that we needed to work on and there was inconsistencies about how we all marked so we had a...[person] came in and taught me how to use rubrics and then we just all went through our old marking criteria which was very loose and reassembled them into these rubrics" - participant G.

Two programmes used rubrics as a standardised style of providing written feedback. Some rubrics had additional comments written on them, others had a separate sheet to include additional written comments. Investigation into whether the use of rubrics are a more effective way of providing written feedback compared to providing a page of written comments was not investigated as part of this research study. But, it could be assumed that the continual use of this form of written feedback meant that the lecturers found it effective.

Internal moderation

The differing styles of written feedback and the range of experiences that influenced the lecturers’ beliefs on how to produce written feedback raises questions about reflection on practice. Is the provision of written feedback reflected upon as part of effective practice? Some lecturers were aware of this dynamic. This became evident when they discussed the need for open discussion and reflection about written feedback when asked about any improvements that they would like to see in relation to written feedback.

"It's quite an interesting topic that you're doing. And I think its something that we as lecturers need to think about more closely. Some of us are very good at doing it and some of us aren't" - participant D.

“... the first semester that I was employed here the course that I co-ordinated was in conjunction with a very experienced lecturer. We double marked. For me that was a good learning opportunity as well because I could look at his marks and gauge what he thought was appropriate and so that was probably my first learning tool. And the other one would be before that, I did the postgraduate programme as a student so probably learnt quite a bit from that as well" - participant E.

An already established system of cross-checking marking that may be used to open up dialogue about written feedback is the process of internal moderation, where a colleague assesses the same piece of student work to ensure the grading is fair and
reliable. When exploring the area of moderation in the interviews with the lecturers, it was found that discussion around written feedback and mentoring was not a key outcome of the moderation system, but that the general purpose of moderation was to double check marking.

“Yes, everything gets moderated. So I find that very useful. Generally the moderation has come back and everything is fine, they agree with everything” - participant E.

“All of our courses are moderated so that is really useful, that’s really good. And especially for this postgrad course we have 3 or 4 assignments that were moderated and marks were the same. Lecturers would write different feedback according to style but marks were the same. I think that means a lot” - participant I.

Four of the lecturers felt that moderation did not influence the written feedback they provided, while six believed that moderation helped with alignment of grades when co-marking. One lecturer thought that moderation improved written feedback but did not elaborate on how these improvements could be implemented.

In summary, learned experience, where the lecturer draws on their own practice as a guide for the provision of written feedback, allows for flexibility and academic freedom. The approach adopted also allows for this flexibility, but the opportunities for induction and further academic dialogue about written feedback through the system of moderation could be further explored.

**Relationship between espoused views and practice**

The focus of this next section is observable practice and the technical aspects of written feedback raised in the literature (Montgomery & Baker, 2000; Ovando, 1994). These technical aspects include a focus on subject matter comments compared to technical comments in written feedback and the use of ticks. The section will conclude with the finding that lecturers requested that more time be allocated to the task of providing written feedback to make it more effective.

**Subject matter compared to technical matter comments**

The characteristics of written feedback were divided into broad areas that relate to subject matter comments and technical matter comments, and lecturers were asked
which types of comments they felt were most valued. These answers are shown in the figures one and two, where the number of participants who said each characteristic was valued has been recorded next to each of the characteristics of written feedback practice. The figures also show a comparison between views and written feedback practice to illustrate which characteristics are most valued.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Written feedback</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Providing a justification for the grade (excluding rubric)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commenting on the level of work</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commenting on the overall impression</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making comments on the learning outcomes</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing opening and closing comments</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking for supporting evidence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commenting on the argument</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing reflective question</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying improvements</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying strengths</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1. Most valued by lecturers - subject matter written feedback comments**
Most valued subject matter written feedback comments. Number of lecturers that showed the characteristic in documentary evidence ("written feedback") or said characteristic was important during the interviews ("interviews").

**Figure 2. Most valued technical matter written feedback comments**

Most valued technical matter written feedback comments. Number of lecturers that showed characteristic in documentary evidence ("written feedback") or said characteristic was important during interviews ("interviews").

**Correlation between views and practice**

The visual comparison demonstrates the relationship between lecturers' views and practice on characteristics of written feedback practice. Figures one and two show that the characteristics of written feedback most valued by lecturers according to views voiced in the interviews are strengths, improvements and referencing. The most valued characteristics that were seen in the documentary evidence of written feedback were comments identifying strengths and looking for supporting evidence.
When lecturer’s views and practice on subject matter comments were compared, a fairly strong correlation was seen between the two results, although for the most valued comments there was only some alignment in the results (figure 1). For example, the importance of identifying a student’s strengths in written feedback was highly valued by lecturers during the interviews and also fairly evident when the examples of written feedback were analysed.

When the technical comments were analysed, again a reasonable degree of correlation is apparent between the views given in the interviews and the evidence in the documentary analysis. This is strongest in comments on overall presentation, commenting on grammar and structure and making corrections to the assignment and was weakest in commenting on referencing (figure 2). It was also seen that overall the highest valued characteristics in views and practice were related to subject matter comments.

Overall, the findings on views and practice show that a fairly strong correlation is evident. However, some limitations in this area of the findings need to be acknowledged. The data collection was incomplete due to receiving only five copies of student’s assignments that accompany the written feedback from the eleven participants. This limitation hinders the analysis of particular characteristics. For example, commenting on referencing would be most apparent in the student’s assignments. It should also be noted that not all lecturers commented on every characteristic due to the open nature of the discussion in the interviews.

Improvement: time

Seven lecturers indicated that more time to write written feedback would be one way of producing more effective written feedback, and some commented that currently they are not able to dedicate as much time as they would like to this aspect of their job.

“Overall, I'd say I am happy with the amount of comments I give unless I'm pressed for time. Time and resources are a big constraint”- participant C.

“I think that [time] would be helpful for workload issues. Because sometimes I think I spend too much time, then I run out of time and use my own time. I think time is a big thing. Yeah, I think that would be helpful”- participant K.
“The hassle of written feedback is that it takes time. And when you’re sitting with 40 assignments and you have 7 hours to do 40 assignments, that’s going to dictate how much feedback [you can provide]”- participant H.

“I’m always pressed. I always work at the weekends. My marking happens out of here. I am teaching when I’m writing that, that stuff is teaching. It’s a piece of the teaching”- participant I.

These findings indicate that if more time was available to provide written feedback, there may be more alignment of what the lecturer would like to achieve, in other words their espoused views, and what actually happens in practice.

Ticks

Following a review of the literature on the language used in written feedback, an additional question was included in the interview schedule that explored the use of ticks in written feedback. This then served as a single technical component that could be examined in both the lecturers’ espoused views and practice. A diverse range of responses to the question were seen, indicating that the use of ticks was a value-based decision that each lecturer made independently on their own beliefs about effective written feedback practice.

“I’ll often do a tick or a put ‘refer to notes’. So the tick will say to them, and I’ll often say that to them, that I’ve ticked where there’s been a clear response”- participant A.

“Use of ticks? I use ticks sparingly. I do it now and then but I had a student come to me once and say ‘I have no idea what that means, a check mark next to a paragraph’. That made me think about that, but I still do it! I use it very sparingly. I can see a student wouldn’t really know what I was thinking. I tend to tick something off if it’s ‘ok, that subject is covered’, or ‘done that bit’. I guess I don’t really expect them to know what a tick means, it’s more a sort of ‘hey, I’ve read this’. It’s like a written nod I suppose”- participant C.

“All the way through their assignment. Every point they make that’s valid they’ll get a tick on it and every time they reference someone they get a tick. And if they say something really good they get two ticks and lots of exclamation marks”- participant H.
Data from the interviews showed that seven participants use ticks as part of their written feedback, with two of the seven using double ticks. Two participants said that they do not use ticks at all. These views were then compared to the documentary evidence of written feedback obtained from the lecturers, which showed that ticks were used in four pieces of written feedback. However, limited conclusions can be drawn from this analysis because six examples of written feedback obtained did not contain the student’s script and could not be included in this analysis.

Lastly, the data from the interviews was compared with the five pieces of analysable documentary analysis (see table 4 below). The documentary evidence showed that the four lecturers who said they used ticks in the interviews did use them in practice, and no ticks were evident on the submitted script of the one lecturer who said they did not use them. These results indicate that espoused views on ticks align with practice.

Table 4. Alignment between views and practice in the use of ticks in written feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Written Feedback</th>
<th>Interview comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No ticks present</td>
<td>Ticks present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A*</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B*</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D*</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G*</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I*</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K*</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Participants A, B, D, G, I and K, did not provide any student assignments for documentary analysis.
Views on grades

The next section is devoted to data related to grades. It appears that a relationship exists between ensuring that written feedback is helpful to the student and awarding a grade. Lecturers appear to be striving for transparency in this process. The topic of grades was not the direct subject of any questions in the interview schedule but was frequently mentioned and appeared ever present in the minds of lecturers as they discussed written feedback.

“They want to be able to see why they got the grade they got and that it was fair and you think they’re good”- participant B.

“That’s what the feedback’s about. The written feedback is to clarify any of these grades. So anything that’s not a full mark does get some comments”- participant H.

“I kind of I suppose I have an idea in my head maybe whether it’s sort of like an A or a B or a C, you know, like a really good, middle of the road or not so good, rather than be thinking of a grade necessarily”- participant K.

“… usually what I do, I’ll go tick, tick, tick and then I will get the impression of the grade and then I type up. I think it’s very important [written feedback]. If I was a student I would find it offensive to get a standardised set of feedback that everybody got who’d got an A with nothing personal. But at the same time its time efficient and it’s met the criteria for what an A is a B, C or a D, so you could do it”- participant D.

These comments suggest that summative assessment is ingrained in both the thoughts of the lecturers and, indeed in every aspect of practice. In other words, written feedback comments is very much linked with the provision of a grade.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study have highlighted some interesting insights into lecturers’ espoused views and practice related to written feedback. They show that a key reason for providing written feedback is to improve students’ work and that written feedback can be presented in a number of ways that reflect the personal views and experiences of each lecturer. The findings also indicate that the espoused views of the lecturer in relation to written feedback are generally aligned to their
practice, indicating that there is sound rationale for practice. A desire for academic dialogue around the provision of written feedback was alluded to in order for written feedback to become a collaborative topic of discussion. Lecturers also stated that they would like more time allocated to the task of providing written feedback. Grading is also highlighted as an influencing factor within written feedback practice. These findings will be discussed in greater depth in chapter five.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The following chapter draws on both the key findings of the present study, and relevant literature on written feedback to discuss the essence and research questions of this research study. The discussion is firmly embedded within the research questions in order to provide insight into the proposed research problem. To recap; the research questions are designed to investigate lecturers’ espoused views and practice related to written feedback. The research aims were to examine lecturers’ views on fundamental practices related to the provision of written feedback, investigate lecturers’ views on written feedback to determine the relationship between espoused theory and practice and to identify the practices employed by lecturers when providing written feedback to postgraduate students.

Introduction

The sections in this chapter will follow the themes that emerged from the research findings. The chapter themes will be discussed under the following headings:

- Purpose of written feedback
- Nature of written feedback practice
- Grades
- Espoused views and practice on written feedback

The results will show that the perspective of the lecturer is a key influence of written feedback practice. They also show that the development of effective written feedback practice, underpinned by theory, is often overlooked and is an area that requires further professional development and consideration.

Purpose of written feedback

Teaching and learning is the driving force behind the provision of written feedback in educational terms (Carless, 2006; Sadler, 1998). Written feedback serves an important role in the teaching process, when the student reads written feedback, it is believed that learning will occur. Overall, the findings from this study suggest that
lecturers believe that students learnt from the written feedback they provided. The
lecturers’ intention when writing comments is that the feedback could instantly
lecturers practice as “striving to provide useful feedback” (p.194), cementing the
notion that written feedback is a teaching tool. However, learning is reliant on the
student engaging with the written feedback. The findings from this study showed that
one lecturer believed that some students did and some students did not engage with
the written feedback, possibly hindering the teaching and learning that may occur
using this tool (Higgins et al, 2002). It is clearly to the detriment of the student to not
engage with the written feedback. However, in the present study all the lecturers still
wanted to provide written feedback, because they believed in its importance.
Nevertheless, Black and William believe that “if the information is not actually used,
then there is no feedback” (1998, p.56). The implication for the lecturer could then be
to ensure that the written feedback is being used by the student, by teaching
students how to engage with written feedback.

Improvement of student’s work

This study showed that the teaching offered through the written feedback, is
fundamentally grounded in the lecturers’ belief that it is provided to identify where
students can improve their work. This view is supported by Willingham’s (1990)
finding that the specificity of the written feedback should be focused on how the
student could do better. My research findings also showed lecturers’ desire to
provide comments that sought to explain to students how they might improve their
work. This also aligns with the study by Carless (2006), which found that lecturers felt
that they provided positive feedback that helped to improve work.

There are differences surrounding the use of written feedback to improve students’
work when it comes to identifying gaps in their performance. For example, comments
such as ‘you need to use more references’ compared to providing information on how
to do better. An example of ‘how to do better’ is the following comment; ‘the study by
Jones (2000) would have supported your comments here’. These types of comments
relate to the principles of effective written feedback when the literature suggests
providing specific, steps to improve, helpful and constructive comments (Holmes &
Smith, 2003; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Ovando, 1994; Parker & Baughan,
2009). Unfortunately, my study did not investigate the specificity of this issue in more depth.

The responses of lecturers in the interviews of the present study suggested that improvement of students’ work was highly valued by lecturers as a role of the written feedback. Furthermore, over half of the documentary evidence obtained from lecturers showed that comments to improve work were evident in the written feedback. This strong relationship between the lecturers’ views and their practice underlines the fact that inclusion of comments on how to improve work is a crucial component of effective written feedback. The findings of the current study corroborate the results from Carless (2006) who found that lecturers “often” provided feedback that helped students to improve their next assignment and Read et al (2005) which reported that five out of six lecturers indicated that they strive to provide comments that will improve student’s work.

The relationship between the lecturers’ espoused views and practice in relation to comments about improving student’s work is an area where fairly good alignment is shown between beliefs with practice. (see table two in findings chapter). However, previous studies examining the views and practice of lecturers on written feedback suggest that these are not aligned (Michael, 2009). The findings of the current study in this area found that in the characteristics of improving students work a high degree of correlation between views and practice existed; but would still suggest that the specificity of this aspect requires further investigation through more vigorous means of discourse analysis. This is a view shared by Bailey and Garner (2010). They suggest that irrespective of the lecturers’ espoused view, reality may not support ‘best’ practice and recommend future studies of lecturer experiences.

**Nature of written feedback practice**

Standardisation of written feedback is a discussion that has been addressed implicitly rather than directly through investigation into styles of written feedback. That is, there are certain institution practices that are followed to ensure that some aspects of written feedback are standardised, such as the provision of assessment criteria. This study showed that the way in which written feedback is styled is accordance with the lecturers’ beliefs and is unique to the lecturer. Style can also be termed ‘presentation’. For example, one lecturer explained that they used headings related
to the learning outcomes as a way of presenting written feedback. This practice raises a question about whether written feedback would be more effective if it was standardised. Holmes and Smith (2003) suggest strategies for how to improve written feedback from a student’s perspective to improve consistency. However, these strategies did not include the use of a standardised format and the question of whether everyone should be doing the same thing remains.

When asked this question, the lecturers in this study strongly believed that they should be able to provide written feedback in the way that best suited their programme and teaching. In other words, they believed that academic autonomy over this aspect of their work was vital to the distinctiveness of their course. This finding indicates that lecturers have faith in their academic ability and value their academic freedom, a belief which allows for innovative practice to emerge. The debate here is not about whether specific principles of effective written feedback practice have been implemented, or common sense practices followed (such as, making comments readable, not writing in red pen) but about the pedagogical perception of the lecturer as they go about writing a piece of written feedback and the choices they make in styling their piece of written feedback. As Sadler (1998) suggests lecturers bring skills and expertise to the job at hand and these abilities should be acknowledged and respected. However, Bloxham (2009) argues that marking is a subjective act that assumes lecturers have common views. A proposed solution is more academic debate around assessment practices, particularly written feedback (Ecclestone & Swann, 1999).

Lecturers in this study believed that some standard consistent practices needed to be followed when providing written feedback and highlighted the need for consistency across courses within a whole programme. This may be an illustration of institutional policies and practices intensifying the issues surrounding practices of written feedback, which was the focus of a piece of work by Bailey and Garner (2010). Bailey and Garner’s study found that institutional practices, such as turnover timeframes, make it difficult for lecturers to provide quality written feedback. Therefore, a result may be differing styles of written feedback.

Formal training

Another finding of the study was that most lecturers learnt to write written feedback through the process of trial and error. In other words they learnt to write feedback ‘on the job’ as part of their lecturing role. Ecclestone and Swann claim that “university
lecturers rarely receive formal induction into an assessment community” (1999, p. 378). This lack of induction means that a lecturer has little understanding of the power of their comments and may struggle to use them to best effect (Chanock, 2000; Yorke, 2003). The lecturers in this study may not be aware of this potential struggle unless it was brought to their attention.

My study also showed that when the experience of the lecturers was compared with the method by which they learnt to write written feedback, older and newer lecturers both indicated that they did not receive training on how to give written feedback. The lecturers did, however, indicate that they base the written feedback they provide on what they would like to receive if they were the student, which shows an empathetic acknowledgment of the writer. This result corroborates with the work by Hand and Clews (2000) who found that lecturers learnt by ‘doing it’, no staff training was provided and they were guided by their own experiences as students. Furthermore, it is suggested, “variation in modes of writing are influenced by conceptualisations of their own disciplines” (Lea & Street, 1998, p.28). However, it should be noted that these findings cannot be generalised across a whole institution and the provision of an induction programme or discipline influence was not investigated.

Although these findings indicate that these lecturers could benefit from a formal induction process and studies show professional development helped improve written feedback (Parker & Baughan, 2009). Teacher education, as used for other sectors of the education system, or a more formal process of induction into lecturing may be advantageous (Timperley, et al, 2007). These findings also highlight an important point made by Sadler (1998), which was that teachers cannot bring about change in their practice if they fail to identify why certain practices are implemented. It appeared that all the lecturers who took part in my study did have a wealth of knowledge and were very experienced and skillful. However, questions remain about why these lecturers had never been taught to provide written feedback to students. Was it because the topic of written feedback had never been discussed with them before or had they not accessed the professional development programmes that the institution has for content specialist lecturers in order to engage in educational theory? Possibly, there is less emphasis placed on the fundamental practice of providing written feedback and more focus placed on setting assignments, in the professional development offered.
Internal moderation processes

Moderation is a process which Bloxham (2009) defines as “a process for assuring that an assessment outcome is valid, fair and reliable and that marking criteria have been applied consistently” (p.212). This definition includes an implicit reference to written feedback. Bailey and Garner (2010) believe that lecturers are aware that written feedback is serving more than one audience, that of the student but also the moderator. Agreeing with this perception, the lecturers in the present study believed that the system of moderation is designed to check work to ensure that the correct grade has been given. This perception could suggest that the system of moderation be explored as a means to provide more discussion around written feedback comments. When the method by which lecturers learnt to provide written feedback was examined, none of them identified moderation was used as a way in which they learnt to provide written feedback.

Practice-based examples of written feedback obtained from lecturers indicate that a range of styles is being used to present written feedback. The provision of some written comments and a grade were the only practices consistent between the pieces of feedback obtained, and all other aspects of the written feedback varied. This supports Bailey and Garner’s (2010, p.195) study that also found a variety in practice around writing feedback and “the way it should be expressed”. However, they believed that the lecturers were aware of these differences. This study was not able to ascertain whether the lecturers were aware that they provided written feedback in different ways, but an assumption could be made that through the process of internal moderation they did have the opportunity to view other lecturers written feedback.

Discussion about written feedback practice

The findings from the current study show that the presentation of written feedback varied between lecturers, indicating that their espoused views regarding written feedback plays a major role in guiding their practice. That is, their own pedagogical beliefs are guiding how they present written feedback in practice. Bloxham (2009) believes that balance between institutional procedures and quality written feedback practices can be achieved if faith is kept in assessment processes. Interestingly, she also suggests a way forward with this dilemma is for more discussion to be undertaken, a point that was also highlighted in the current study’s findings.
Discussion about written feedback was an area that consistently arose as an area that lecturers would like to develop. This indicated that a stronger link could be made between views and practice if more discussion around the provision of written feedback occurred. Bailey and Garner (2010) found that practices are often implemented without the appropriate amount of discussion. Moreover, these practices also rely on the lecturer drawing on what they know and are therefore constrained by the knowledge of the individual lecturer (Lea & Street, 1998). Therefore, the discussion of written feedback between lecturers would draw on a number of experiences and would likely result in the implementation of better and more consistent written feedback practices.

Formal professional development and discussion about written feedback may be viewed, as one lecturer interviewed in this study described as a ‘taboo’ area. In other words, lecturers often like to believe they are doing their best and therefore do not discuss their written feedback practice. Bloxham (2009) believes the general lack of discourse is an area that is too uncomfortable to discuss. However, discussion may remove bias and allows for continued learning, especially for those who are teaching in discipline areas without any educational training. Ecclestone and Swan (1999) found in their study that professional development allowed lecturers to have more confidence to make changes that enhanced outcomes and justified effective practice.

**Grades**

Written feedback in its most basic form according to the findings of this research consists of two fundamental aspects; the provision of written words that are personalised comments; and a grade. The present study showed that lecturers believe that the awarding of a grade has a subtle yet profound influence on written feedback. This influence can be seen not only through comments that justify the grade, but also in dictating a way of thinking that parallels the feedback. For example, deciding if an assignment is graded A, B or C influences the content of the written feedback provided. Whether the grade or comments should be the focus of written feedback has received much discussion in the literature (Maclellan, 2001; Rogoff, 2001; Sadler, 1998; Yorke, 2003). Maclellan (2001) argues that the awarding of the grade, followed by comments on developmental aspects, is the focus of the lecturers practice. This clearly suggests that the focus is firstly on the grade and then the written comments. Although aspects of this approach were seen, the present study found that the grade was not solely the focus of the written feedback. This indicates a pedagogically sound approach to the provision of written feedback and supports the
conclusion that written feedback is viewed as a way of enhancing learning (Sadler, 1998).

Research into students’ perspectives of written feedback (Carless, 2006, Higgins et al, 2002, Holmes & Smith, 2003), shows that students read the written feedback they receive but are also highly motivated to find out their grade. It could be suggested that lecturers still provide written feedback in the hope that the student will read this once they have seen their grade. Sims - Knight and Upchurch (2001) suggest that in this scenario, the grade acts as a reward. This reward elicits an emotional response from which it is hoped that a learning response will follow. The intention of the lecturers in the present study is that the provision of written feedback is to facilitate learning irrespective of whether the student reads the grade or the comments. Yorke (2003) believes that lecturers hope that the effort put into providing written feedback promotes learning. This belief is that written feedback is “a collaborate act between staff and student whose primary purpose is to enhance the capabilities of the latter to the fullest extent” (p.496).

Rubrics

Rubrics were used by two of the programmes, indicating the use of a standard written feedback style. This rubric was sometimes accompanied by another sheet of written feedback comments. The use of a rubric as a standardised form of written feedback serves the purpose of keeping the comments and grade focused on the task being assessed (Brookhart, 2008). However, Bloxham (2009) believes that rubrics are constructed from the knowledge and approach that the person constructing them holds, indicating a subjective approach is still being taken but in a more formalised way.

The use of a rubric, as was the case in two of the programmes included in this study, seeks to align the grade to the expected outcome. Reddy and Andrade (2010) believe rubrics can be used to grade students work, but can also be used to teach students about grade-related targets to encourage independent learning. However, Nicol and Macfarlane – Dick (2006) caution that without some form of personalised comments accompanying the rubrics, the written feedback does not address the student personally, something that is a key desired outcome from a student’s perspective (Higgins et al, 2002).
Transparency

This study showed that the interlinking of the grade and written feedback, and the relationship between these aspects is based on the desire of the lecturer to show transparency in the written feedback. In other words, to demonstrate how and why a grade was given, to consistently justify this grade through the written comments. The relationship between the written feedback and the grade is interlinked even though the two could exist separately. That is, written feedback could exist without a grade and a grade could be given without written feedback. This also indicates how the grade and written feedback can complement each other, and that the grade can be used to help provide effective written feedback (Carless, 2006). This position also affirms the belief outlined in the literature that written feedback plays a valuable formative as well as summative role in assessment practice (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Brown & Glover, 2006; Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006).

Postgraduate level

In the research design and the research information for this study there is a clear emphasis on postgraduate study as the focus for the discussion on written feedback. Discussion with lecturers on postgraduate level of study highlighted that the differences in the written feedback occurred when the comments were pitched at the different levels of study. Lecturers would refer to and relate the level of study to the comments in their written feedback. It also found that the style of written feedback up to the level of a thesis is treated in a similar way as module assignments of varying types and only at thesis level does the written feedback to students change. Only one participant particularly focussed their discussion on thesis written feedback. The findings highlight the differing roles of written feedback, one of which is Hyatt’s (2005) focus on induction into the academic community which has different expectations at different levels of study with a more advanced expectation at thesis level.

Grades and comments

It was common practice among all the lecturers that participated in this study across programmes to award a grade to each assignment, (with the exception of a thesis). This practice is embedded in programme requirements, therefore maybe both a belief of the lecturer and to follow guidelines. This grade identifies the proficiency of
the students' learning against set criteria. The role of grading can be seen as a way of sorting students, a system that is historically meaningful and related to the needs of society (Rogoff, 2001).

A grade was present on every piece of written feedback provided to students from all of the lecturers included in this study. Bloxham (2009) argues that a belief in the grading system remains unchallenged, in that lecturers rely on set procedures to ensure that reliable grading occurs. This practice identifies two distinct aspects of written feedback; comments and grades and provides both formative and summative elements to the written feedback. Rogoff (2001) challenges this position, arguing that these two aspects should be separated as they hold opposing roles. That is, a grade is an award and the comments are designed to enhance learning, believing only comments should be provided. A view held by others, such as Yorke (2003), who is opposed to a future where grades will be the focus, possibly completely altering the role of written feedback.

The relationship between the belief of the lecturer about grades and their practice shown in this study and discussed above shows that the grade and written feedback are inseparable. Awarding of a grade is not only an evaluation system, in a summative role, but also integrated into written feedback, by informing the content of the written comments. In summary, it could be argued that a grade provides a framework around which lecturers may base their written feedback. In the proposed framework, the grade acts as a conduit to facilitate teaching through written feedback, by relating it directly to the assignment. The findings of this study suggest that, from the perspective of the lecturer, the purpose of the grade is to inform and justify written feedback.

**Espoused views and practice on written feedback**

There is an ongoing debate in the literature about the relative merits of providing subject matter compared to technical comments in written feedback, particularly in terms of deciding which type of comments should have priority. However, there is a general consensus that both types of comments should be included in written feedback for it to be effective (Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Ovando, 1994; Willingham, 1990). Subject matter relates specifically to comments about the content of a particular assignment, whereas technical aspects relate to structural comments.
that are generic and can be transferable to other assignments. The lecturer interviews performed for the present study indicate that subject matter comments are the most valued characteristics of written feedback. The top three characteristics of written feedback identified by the most number of lecturers were comments that identified strengths, showed the student how to improve their work, and comments on referencing. These views align with the hierarchy of comments proposed by Willingham (1990), who believes that comments on subject matter/content should come before the more obvious comments on technique/mechanics. This is to ensure that more emphasis is placed on subject matter comments because technical comments are easier for the student to engage with.

Examination of the documentary evidence of written feedback provided by lecturers in this study, showed that comments focused on strengths and supporting evidence were the most frequently observed characteristics of written feedback. (See table one in chapter four). Practice among the lecturers who participated in this study was therefore focused on indicating to students what they had done well and how supporting evidence can be used to understand the subject content in more depth.

Analysis of the relationship between espoused views and practice showed a reasonable degree of correlation. When technical comments were examined, there was an elevated degree of correlation between lecturers’ views and practice. However, when subject matter comments were explored there was less alignment between lecturers’ views and practice, which was surprising since subject matter comments are highly valued in both practice and views. The present study also found that from a lecturers’ perspective content was the most important aspect of the written feedback, a finding that differs from Storch and Tapper’s (2000) study, which found that comments on mechanics were the focus of the written feedback. Although the present studies results show a fairly strong correlation between views and practice, the overall conclusion agrees with the findings of Montgomery and Baker (2007) who believe that the value of this result for teachers to provide effective written feedback is an awareness of beliefs regarding the provision of written feedback. From the findings of the current study it is believed that the quality of feedback actually given is an area that requires further examination.

The lecturers who participated in this study signified that having more time allocated to the task would make the written feedback more effective. A workload implication for lecturers, due to the institutional context is a sensitive topic (Carless, 2006). That is, timeframes are allocated to the task of assessing assignments. Time to write
comments were also an area highlighted as a key structural constraint in the study by Bailey and Garner (2010).

Ticks

Lecturers’ practice was analysed for their use of ticks using a similar focus as Chanock (2000), who explored an understanding of the word ‘analysis’ and Lea and Street (1998) who analysed texts from a lecturers’ and students’ point of view. The use of ticks is also an objective practice that could be both described by lecturers and was easily seen in their practice. Lecturers were asked if they used ticks in practice and what the ticks meant. Lecturers’ practice varied greatly, from lecturers not using ticks at all to lecturers using two ticks for great ‘work’.

Chanock (2000) argues that difficulties can emerge from the language used when giving written feedback, for example, when the meaning of a comment is misinterpreted. With respect to the use of ticks, the findings of the present study concurred with Chanock. Shared understanding was not apparent amongst the lecturers and the use of a tick was seen to have several meanings. Similar variation was reported in a study by Lea and Street (1998) which investigated the use of orthographic marks and their meanings. For example, the symbols “?” or “!” were used to indicate “not understood” or “what does this mean”. These findings indicate that communication through written feedback needs to be clear and coherent, and suggests that a shared understanding amongst lecturers needs to be attained. Michael (2009) suggests that processes that a lecturer engages in on a daily basis should be re-examined, a process which may allow the individual lecturer to grow as an educator.

The documentary evidence obtained in this study showed that a range of ticks were used in practice. Although there was great diversity among lecturers in the use of ticks, there was strong correlation between the lecturers’ views on the use of ticks and their practice. For example, the lecturer who said they did not use ticks, no ticks were found in their example of written feedback.
**Conclusion**

The main focus of the present study is the lecturers’ perspective on written feedback. The key findings showed that the purpose of written feedback was to improve student’s work, and that feedback is styled in a manner that relates to the beliefs and experiences of each lecturer. Other findings include the relationship between the grade and the feedback comments along with a fairly high degree of alignment between lecturers’ espoused views and their practice. The espoused views of the lecturer with regards to written feedback influenced their practice to a large degree.

In line with the current studies being conducted in the UK in Higher Education (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Bloxham, 2009) the historical focus has been ensuring the student understands, and therefore benefits from, written feedback. The findings from this study suggest that before a student/lecturer alignment can be achieved, lecturers’ beliefs and practices need to be explored amongst themselves. My study affords an understanding of lecturers’ lived practice in relation to written feedback and provides a starting point for these discussions.

The next chapter will draw conclusion from the findings and discussion in order to answer the research questions, and provide recommendations for future research. The limitations of my study will also be discussed.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

In this chapter conclusions are drawn from the findings of the study in relation to the research questions. I then outline some recommendations for future research to extend on the knowledge gained from this study of lecturers’ views and practice in providing written feedback.

Introduction

The study gathered real life experiences of lecturers working with postgraduate students to capture the essence of their ideas and practice specific to one aspect of their teaching; written feedback. The lecturers were asked to share their views about written feedback and provide documentary evidence of their practice. The views shared by the lecturers and conclusions gained from the collective voice of their experiences around written feedback are the foundation of this study. One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size, with only eleven lecturers included, so the findings need to be considered in this context. The lecturers who agreed to participate in the study are also most likely to be interested in the topic and therefore participant bias towards the topic could mean that the findings may not be representative, even across the small sample size.

This chapter will conclude by exploring the other limitations of the study, some where the nature of studying people’s perspectives means that flexibility and openness to generate discussion took priority.

Conclusions

The initial possible outcomes of the research study were:

- the study will provide insight into lecturers’ espoused views and practice around written feedback;
- the research study may highlight ways in which written feedback can be enhanced to the benefit of the student;
• lecturers will gain an understanding of how their practice and views impact on their teaching practice; and
• to build on the body of knowledge in relation to assessment and in particular written feedback.

It is believed that all of these outcomes and the research questions on which they were based have been achieved, due to the conclusions outlined below.

The nature of written feedback – lecturers’ espoused views

The lecturers who participated in this study believed their students would learn from the written feedback they provided. This belief is embedded in an idea that written feedback is an essential part of their teaching practice and used with the aim of showing students how to improve their work. The lecturers’ espoused view in terms of the knowledge they draw on to provide written feedback is influenced by their own experiences, with many lecturers intuitively providing what they believe is quality written feedback. Many of the lecturers based the method by which they provide written feedback on what they experienced as a student themselves. Most importantly, lecturers believed that providing comments on the strengths of the assignment and ways in which the student could improve the assignment were two key elements of value in written feedback.

Based on these key findings, I can conclude that the views of the lecturers’ about the work they do in providing written feedback is real and valid due to their implementation of pedagogical practice. A strong link to educational theory or the principles of effective feedback was not expressed by the participants, but a genuine belief in providing suggestions as to how the student might improve their work, often linked to the desire for the student to get a better grade, was evident in the views expressed.

The study highlighted some interesting findings in the area of internal moderation, with lecturers believing that one of the main reasons for moderation was to cross-check grading. The conclusion from these findings is that moderation could be an area for further expansion to enhance written feedback practice.
The nature of written feedback – lecturers’ practice

Generalised characteristics of written feedback practice were explored in order to investigate the links between views and practice. The researcher thought of a list of observable characteristics and the lecturers were asked about their views of these characteristics. A piece of written feedback was obtained from each lecturer and analysed for the presence of these characteristics. In addition, the use of ticks was questioned in interviews and analysed in the documentary evidence of written feedback. The study found that in practice, comments on the subject matter and the students’ strengths were the most evident aspects of the written feedback. Furthermore, a strong alignment between views and practice was seen in the use of ticks. Lecturers who said in the interviews that they used ticks in practice, did use ticks in their practice while those that said they did not use ticks did not use ticks in practice.

An interesting finding from this study was the diversity of presentation styles of written feedback provided by lecturers to students and was something that was linked to both views and practice. In practice, the style or presentation of written feedback could include any of the following: the use of a cover sheet; a rubric; a typed letter; or a handwritten sheet outlined with the learning outcomes of the assignment. The conclusion from these findings was that the diversity of feedback style allowed lecturers to present feedback in a way that they felt most comfortable with. However, during their interviews the majority of lecturers indicated their desire to discuss different ways in which written feedback can be presented.

Some programmes used rubrics for grading and these were accompanied by written feedback comments. Unfortunately, further investigation into the reasons for the use of rubrics was outside the scope of this study and was not included in the interview questions. However, from the present study I can conclude that there is a need for a good understanding of the purpose and outcomes of using rubrics in written feedback, especially if it is being used as the sole means of providing written feedback comments.

The relationship between lecturers’ views and practice – written feedback

There was a fairly high degree of correlation between observed practice and what the lecturers believed they were doing in practice in providing written feedback. The two
characteristics that aligned were providing comments on the overall presentation and comments focused on the argument. The key findings showed a good degree of correlation in the areas of commenting on improvements and strengths, with comments focusing on subject matter more valued than technical matter comments. A sound position according to the literature on effective written feedback (Storch & Tapper, 2000; Willingham, 1990). Overall, the characteristics of written feedback practice showed a reasonable degree of correlation between views and practice. However, an interesting aspect of the relationship between views and practice was how the awarding of grades influenced written feedback comments. All lecturers provided a grade with their written feedback, with the exception of those providing feedback on thesis. It can be concluded that the grade and the written comments are interlinked components and together form the main components of written feedback practice. I can also conclude that lecturers have a strong desire to provide written feedback in their own style, a view that was overwhelmingly shared by lecturers and observed in their documented written feedback practice.

I believe a gap still exists whereby the written feedback is viewed as summative. However, there is the potential to use written feedback in a more formative role. For example, where students are encouraged to use and apply written feedback to assignments and lecturers then assess the specific use of this feedback in future assignments.

Other conclusions

While the aim at the outset of this study was to find out about written feedback practice, from the second interview it became clear that a greater achievement from this study could be to provide the lecturers with a ‘voice’ so that their experiences with written feedback could be heard. Following this, the study may serve as a good starting point for discussion about written feedback. I thought I was starting from a basis of generally knowing what the lecturers were already doing in their practice. However, I found that I did not really know what they were thinking and doing at all. It is from this point that the lecturers’ ‘voices’ about written feedback could be heard, documented and conclusions made. I am thankful to the lecturers who shared their views.
Recommendations

The recommendations section is in two parts. The first part comprises recommendations for professional development and/or processes that could be put into place to explore written feedback with lecturers in more depth. The second part contains suggestions for further research related to this topic.

In line with the study by Parker and Baughan (2009) I suggest that professional development around effective written feedback be implemented. However, this dialogue needs to be encapsulated within an understanding of what lecturers are currently doing in their practice and why they are doing it in order to empower them with knowledge to make changes. I would add to this that an exemplar document be produced showing a range of examples of written feedback practice to show the innovative ideas around written feedback that are currently being practiced. Additionally, I suggest that new lecturers are given an induction and mentoring programme. Given the fact that these programmes already exist in many institutions, the results from my study suggest that these programmes are not being utilised.

The results from my study related to the use of ticks showed a high correlation between views and practice. However, there was also diversity in views on what the use of ticks meant. Along with the unpacking of other terminology used in written feedback, a shared understanding amongst lecturers is needed around the language used in written feedback practice.

The internal moderation system could be expanded to include academic discussion about written comments, to check both the grade and the effectiveness of the written comments. The internal moderation system already exists as a formal professional forum for this type of discussion. It could be further utilised by the moderator to make recommendations to the lecturer on the content of the written comments, if this is not already occurring.

A further recommendation based on the findings of this study is the encouragement of discussion around written feedback within programmes. While lecturers may retain academic freedom (as the lecturers in this study stated), the sharing of innovative practices and stories would allow personal/professional continual learning and growth in the provision of written feedback. Discussion can only result in further empowering lecturers in their practice.
Future research

Many areas of written feedback were touched on in this study. A number of areas for future research are identified below. These include:

- the use of rubrics as a form of written feedback could be investigated to explore the relationship between their use and the principles of effective written feedback;

- investigation into what works for lecturers, what could be improved and what lecturers would feel would work for them in the provision of induction programmes within institutions;

- investigation into specific ways of providing written feedback on how to bridge the gap between identifying what needs improving in a student's assignment compared to how improvements could be made; and

- further exploration of lecturers' perceptions of written feedback through online learning. Online written feedback and the instant response inherent in this way of communicating were not explored in this study because none of the participants used this form of written feedback. However, this practice is increasingly common and there is a body of literature focused on this area (Czaplewski, 2009; Debuse, Lawley & Shibli, 2008).

Limitations of this study

Although concluding by discussing the limitations of the study may appear to be finishing on a negative note, it is more the case of acknowledging how the nature of studying peoples’ views allowed for openness to new ideas.

The major limitation of the study was not gathering enough student assignments from the lecturers. This resulted in a lower incidence of documentary analysis and therefore less ability to triangulate methods and correlate data between espoused views and practice. For example, some feedback was provided without copies of the student script and what had been written on the script. This meant that some areas of documentary analysis were limited to only the written feedback cover sheets. This
limitation has been shown in the findings chapter. However, the rich data that was obtained from the interviews was too valuable to disregard simply on the basis of the limited practice examples. The interview data became the crux of the findings, as interesting developments occurred reflecting an evolving research process, as was outlined in the methodology, such as the exploration of the use of ticks.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the interviews with eleven participants and the insights gained into their thoughts about written feedback have been a valuable start to ongoing discussion on this topic. The findings and discussion have successfully answered the research questions. By exploring lecturers’ espoused views of written feedback practice it is seen that the main role of written feedback is to improve students’ work, that grades and feedback comments play a fundamental role in the content of written feedback, that each individual lecturer’s style influences the written feedback they provide, and that in various aspects of written feedback content there is a high degree of alignment between what lecturers value and what they do in practice.
List of References


Table 1. Example of a rubric (Reddy & Andrade, 2010, p.436)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research topic</td>
<td>information about the topic is given for the first time</td>
<td>The rubric gives appropriate information for the given topic.</td>
<td>Little appropriate information given for the topic.</td>
<td>The annotations are taken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about the topic</td>
<td>Information about the topic is very broad but not appropriate.</td>
<td>The paper gives complete and appropriate information for the topic.</td>
<td>Information about the topic is not given or not appropriate.</td>
<td>Little appropriate information for the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research design</td>
<td>The paper provides a clear, logical, and consistent explanation of the research design</td>
<td>The rubric gives appropriate information for the given design.</td>
<td>Little appropriate information for the given design.</td>
<td>The annotations are taken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>The paper provides a comprehensive and well-organized review of the literature related to the topic</td>
<td>The rubric gives appropriate information for the given literature.</td>
<td>Little appropriate information for the given literature.</td>
<td>The annotations are taken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>The paper provides a clear and logical explanation of the methodology</td>
<td>The rubric gives appropriate information for the given methodology.</td>
<td>Little appropriate information for the given methodology.</td>
<td>The annotations are taken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>The paper provides a clear and logical explanation of the data analysis</td>
<td>The rubric gives appropriate information for the given data analysis.</td>
<td>Little appropriate information for the given data analysis.</td>
<td>The annotations are taken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>The paper provides a clear and logical explanation of the conclusion</td>
<td>The rubric gives appropriate information for the given conclusion.</td>
<td>Little appropriate information for the given conclusion.</td>
<td>The annotations are taken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for practice</td>
<td>The paper provides a clear and logical explanation of the implications for practice</td>
<td>The rubric gives appropriate information for the given implications for practice.</td>
<td>Little appropriate information for the given implications for practice.</td>
<td>The annotations are taken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>The paper provides a comprehensive and well-organized list of references</td>
<td>The rubric gives appropriate information for the given references.</td>
<td>Little appropriate information for the given references.</td>
<td>The annotations are taken.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References:
Appendix B: Contact letter to programme directors

Kia ora

My name is Angela Edlin. I am undertaking a research project conducted as part of the Master of Education degree in the Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology and seek your help in meeting the requirements of my thesis research.

Could you please pass on to your lecturers who mark or have marked at postgraduate level the information sheet about the research, in order to recruit participants.

The topic of my study is lecturers’ views and practices of written feedback. I am interested in finding out about lecturers’ views and practices in relation to the written feedback provided to students as part of assessment practice. A greater understanding of what lecturers think and do in relation to written feedback will enhance the understanding of this topic and provide information about ways in which written feedback can be enhanced.

Please share this information with possible interested staff. I require at least 15 participants from the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences – excluding the Department of Education.

The information sheet outlines all that is involved with the research. Participation equates to approximately 50 minutes of time – in the form of an individual interview and the provision of a piece of written feedback for documentary analysis, with student names removed from these documents. Please be assured that confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Neither the participants nor their departments will be identified in any documentation. Names on interview sheets will be deleted, as there is no need for participants to be identified. Alphabetical coding will be used to match interviews with documents. This ensures anonymity of participants on records.

My research supervisor is Mary Panko on 8154321 ext 8552, Department of Education, Bldg 180/2011. My contact details are … if anyone has any questions, please feel free to call.

I will contact you shortly to follow up this request. Thank you for your help I really appreciate it.

Regards

Angela Edlin
Appendix C: Information sheet for participants

Thesis title: Written feedback – lecturers' perspectives

Kia ora

This information sheet is to tell you about a research project being conducted by Angela Edlin as part of the Master of Education degree in the Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology. I seek your help in meeting the requirements of the research for a thesis course, which forms a substantial part of this degree.

I wish to invite you to participate in this research.

What is the research about?
I am interested in finding out about lecturers’ views and practices in relation to the written feedback provided to students as part of assessment practice. A greater understanding of what lecturers think and do in relation to written feedback will enhance the understanding of this topic and provide information about ways in which written feedback can be enhanced.

The research objectives are to:
 Examine lecturers’ views on written feedback to determine the relationship between espoused theory and practice.
 Identify the practices employed by lecturers when providing written feedback to tertiary students.

Who will the research involve?
Lecturers who mark at postgraduate level from the Faculty of Social and Health Science will be asked to participate (excluding the Department of Education where I am a current student, due to conflict of interest).

What will participation involve?
Lecturers that agree to participate will take part in one semi-structured interview. The interview will focus on the lecturers’ view of written feedback. The interview will take place at Unitec and will take approximately 50 min.

Participants will also be asked to submit one piece of written feedback that they have marked at postgraduate level to be used for documentary analysis. Written feedback consist of the students’ assignment with comments written on it, the marking criteria for that particular assignment, the assignment questions, any cover sheets that are used and the written feedback given to the student with the returned assignment.

Participants have the right to withdraw from the research for up to two weeks after the interview. Participants will also be given the opportunity to check any transcripts of the discussion from the interviews, for up to two weeks after the interview. I will ask you to sign a consent form agreeing to take part in the research.

What will happen to the information?
Raw data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and transcribed data will be kept in the researchers’ password-protected computer.
Participants may choose to have a summary of the findings sent to them at the completion of the research.
Neither you, nor your Department will be identified in the Thesis.
Key findings may be shared with the wider educational community through publication of the research.

Confidentiality and Anonymity
Please be assured that confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Neither the participants nor their departments will be identified in any documentation. Names on interview sheets will be deleted, as there is no need for participants to be identified. Alphabetical coding will be used to match interviews with documents. This ensures anonymity of participants on records.

Who is conducting the research?
Researcher: Angela Edlin
Contact details: ph: …
Email: …

Research supervisor: Mary Panko
Department of Education
Bldg 180/2011
8154321 ext 8552

Your questions or comments are most welcome and please feel free to call the researcher.

What now?
Please contact the researcher over the next two days to arrange for an interview to be set up at a time that is convenient for you. ph: …
Email: …

Thank you. I will be in touch shortly.

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2009/989
This study has been approved by the UNITEC Research Ethics Committee from July 2009 to July 2010. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix D: Confirmation letter for participants

Thesis title: Written feedback – lecturers’ perspectives
Researcher: Angela Edlin

Thank you for agreeing to be part of my research. I really appreciate you giving your valuable time and views.

To confirm the details of our telephone discussion, the interview will take place on (day, date, time) at (location).

Please bring along a photocopy of written feedback, which you have marked at postgraduate level. Written feedback consist of the students assignment with comments written on it, the marking criteria for that particular assignment, the assignment questions, any cover sheets that are used and the written feedback given to the student with the returned assignment. Please ensure that student names have been removed from these documents.

Please also note the following:

- The interview will be recorded for transcribing purposes.
- Written informed consent will be gained before any interview takes place.
- Please be assured that confidentiality will be maintained at all times in line with ethical requirements.
- I have attached a copy of the interview questions for you to look at prior to your interview.

Again, I thank you very much for your participation. If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me on … or my research supervisor Mary Panko on 8154321 ext 8552, Department of Education, Bldg 180/2011.

Regards

Angela Edlin

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2009/989
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Appendix E: Interview schedule

Thesis title: Written feedback – lecturers’ perspectives

Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Outline
Welcome/Introductions
- Discuss info sheet/consent forms – answer any questions
  - Explain use of sample (documentary analysis)

Note: Please remember when commenting that we are focusing on postgraduate level and that the focus of the study is on written feedback to students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General views</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Warm up) How long have you been marking? Tell me about what you mark currently. How did you learn to mark and provide written feedback?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me your initial thoughts about providing written feedback?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think is the main role of written feedback?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe the way you provide written feedback?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Written feedback approaches

| Do you use a particular approach or theory in relation to your written feedback practice? – have you ever read anything about feedback that you have then applied in practice? |       |
| Have you thought about what the student could learn from the written feedback you provide? |       |
| Tell me how moderation or peer discussion influences the written feedback you provide? |       |
| Some of the literature talks about the tensions between formative and summative assessment. Does whether the assessment is formative or summative influence the written feedback you provide? |       |
| I have asked you to focus on written feedback to postgraduate students. I am interested to know if and how your written feedback is different when assessing postgraduate students generally as compared to feedback for other students? |       |

Use of sample written feedback
Thanks for providing this piece of written feedback. Tell me… was there a reason you chose to give me this particular piece of written feedback?

Thinking about the written feedback that you have brought with you…
Please show me and explain to me some of the written feedback comments you have provided here.

Can you also show me a couple of specific examples of written feedback that you believe enhances the students understanding? Why do you do this?

What are your views on these areas?
- Level of work in relation to level of course
- Your overall impression
- How learning outcomes have been met
- Identifying strengths
- Identifying where improvements are needed
- Focus on the argument
- Focus on the subject matter
- Use of supporting evidence
- Structure – eg: grammar, sentence structure
- Justification for the grade given
- Opening and closing comments
- Presentation of the work
- Reflective questions
- Corrections
- Referencing
- Use of Ticks

(These areas will be printed on a separate piece of paper to show to the participants.)

Earlier, when we talking about ..(initial thoughts, role of written feedback) ..you mentioned…… Can you show me how this is reflected in this piece of written feedback?

Finish
What improvements would you like seen in relation to written feedback?

Are there any other things you feel you would like to tell me? Thank you for your participation. It is most appreciated.

Would you like a summary of the findings sent to you at the end of the project? Would you like to check the transcript of our discussion?
Appendix F: Example of a typical response to the list of written feedback characteristics

"Definitely number one, level of the work. Definitely has to be postgraduate. That’s probably the crucial part. And the comments - there’s often reference to level 7, level 8, and the students are informed of that, exactly what that means. So that’s totally part of it. Overall impression is really interesting. Because if I look at a piece of work and can read it easily, its well presented, it puts you in a good frame of mind and it bothers me sometimes that marking can be quite subjective..... If something is nicely presented it makes a big difference. If it’s been well proofread, the content can be less well written I guess. Learning outcomes are being met: I don’t always cross-reference to the learning outcomes. Probably more important for me is that it actually answers the specific question. And I guess that goes back to when the question was actually written - that you’re looking at the learning outcomes. Identifying strengths: Yes. Feedback - I try to find at least something good for everybody. And more importantly I tend to identify where improvements are needed. Focus on the argument and the subject matter: that is, with this new marking criteria (rubrics) it’s a wee bit easier to do. Subject matter comes under the content knowledge. Use of supporting evidence is crucial. That’s a really important one for me. Someone would not do very well if they didn’t have supporting evidence and a range of supporting evidence. I’d mark someone down if they only used one source. Structure: incredibly important. For me, how they structure it and write it shows me whether they understand it or whether they’ve just tried to get things out of books and put it all together and not really understood it. So the way it’s structured can make a big difference. Justification for the grade given: I guess the justification is the, I don’t know, if I justify it, other than as examples sometimes, I guess the justification is how the numbers add up. I don’t know, I don’t actually specifically think about that one I think. You get a feeling. When you’re reading something you kind of get a gut feeling this is an A, it’s a B, it’s a C, somewhere around there” - participant E.
Appendix G: Photo
Appendix H: Participant consent form

Research title: Written feedback – lecturers’ perspectives

CONSENT TO RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Researcher: Angela Edlin

I have received an information sheet describing the above research. I know that I can contact the researcher to ask any further questions.

I understand that I may withdraw myself, or any information I have provided for the research – I can do this up to two weeks after the interview has taken place without penalty or need to provide reasons.

I understand that my participation will involve:

1. Participating in one individual semi structured interview of 50 min. I understand that the interview will be recorded and transcribed.

2. Providing one piece of written feedback, marked at postgraduate level to be used for documentary analysis.

I understand that any information I provide will remain confidential and will be kept anonymous. My comments will not be identifiable to anyone other than the researcher.

Please tick to give consent:

☐ I give my consent to participate in this research.

Signed:

Name:

Date:

Researcher: Angela Edlin

Signed:

Date

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2009/989
This study has been approved by the UNITEC Research Ethics Committee from July 2009 to July 2010. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.