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The highs and lows of written feedback: student evaluation of writing centre written responses

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Abstract

In-person, one-to-one verbal feedback has long been prioritised in learning development. However, there are instances where written feedback proves to be a more convenient option. This study investigated the reasons why students request, and how they perceive, the written feedback they receive from a writing centre at a university in the UK. To gather insights, 249 students who had received written feedback during the academic year 2020-21 were invited to complete a questionnaire. 54 students responded, representing a response rate of 21.6%. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 students. It was found that most students requested written feedback due to convenience, although some, particularly those with dyslexia, preferred written feedback over in-person feedback as it allows them to reflect on, and process, the information in their own time. The detailed nature of the written feedback increases the students' perception that the university cares about them, which makes them feel valued and important. Although the findings relate to written feedback, they are relevant for in-person feedback by emphasising how important it is to allow students with dyslexia the time they need to write, listen and speak, during writing centre appointments.

Key words: feedback; written feedback; dyslexia; learning development.

Introduction

Understanding how students use our feedback is fundamental to learning developers. The focus of this understanding has long been that of in-person, spoken interaction, but some writing centres also offer written feedback. This study reports on research into written feedback at a university in the South West of England where a high proportion of students

are studying creative subjects. In addition to one-to-one support through 45-minute appointments, students who are on placement can also send in a draft of their essay for written feedback. These are often students on teaching placement, and they can find it difficult to attend an appointment during the working day. During the pandemic, when the university transitioned to online delivery, the offer of e-mail feedback was extended to all students, not just those on placement.

Writing this feedback for students is a lengthy process. Responses are provided in a letter format, encompassing 500-600 words of prose, with a focus on the three main things a student could do to improve their work. A typical e-mail of written feedback begins by addressing the students personally and indicating what the adviser particularly enjoyed about the essay. It then points out what the student has done well and what they could improve. It is structured as a letter, with paragraphs, in contrast to comments on the students' document, which is an approach that is often adopted in writing centres, and frequently found in lecturer feedback. This process takes longer than a face-to-face appointment, as word choice is more important when separated from tone of voice and body language. Unlike face-to-face appointments, students' reactions in the moment cannot be judged. It can feel that, even with the level of care the advisors take during the writing process, there is the chance that this well-intentioned feedback may be perceived as unhelpful, demotivating or overwhelming. The learning developers in the team go beyond surface level problems such as referencing and formatting to provide feed-forward on the broader development of ideas and critical thinking. However, the team sometimes fear that students are hoping for a proofreading service, and might only pay attention to those aspects that are quickest and easiest to implement.

This study was carried out in order to establish whether these fears are unfounded, and how we can improve the support offered to students. Research in learning development has tended to sideline written feedback, focussing instead on the ways we talk to students about their work (Babcock and Thonus, 2018). This study addresses this by investigating why students request written feedback, and how they feel about the written feedback they receive. Their responses centred around their motivation for seeking feedback, their response to the feedback, and finally, the broader context of where writing centre feedback sits alongside feedback from other sources.

Literature review

Definitions

Feedback can be defined as information provided by one person to another about their performance regarding a task (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Burke and Pietrick (2010) offer an overview of the literature on feedback, beginning at the start of the 20th century with Thorndyje's law of effect, moving through behaviourist theories that centred on the actions of the tutor, to more student focussed constructivist models. More recent research into feedback looks at the benefits of dialogic feedback, where the student's response modifies the interaction (Blair and McGinty, 2013). Despite this, Nicol (2010) points out that the one-way communication in written feedback makes up the vast majority of tutor/student interaction, and more needs to be done to encourage the kind of dialogue that enables students to understand and engage with the feedback they receive. The dialogic element is present in writing centre appointments, which reflects best practice as outlined by the QAA (2018); however, dialogue is reduced or absent from our written feedback.

Benefits of feedback

Feedback has many uses: to clarify expectations; provide learning opportunities; give praise; and show care in students' wellbeing and progress (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Rowe 2017). Where it is future-focused and solution based, it is often termed 'feedforward' (Duncan, 2007). Students want to use feedback to rectify their mistakes and close the gap between the required performance for the task and their current level (Ibarra-Sáiz, Rodríguez-Gómez and Boud, 2020). Feedback is clearly an effective tool for this, as students who engage with feedback achieve higher grades than those who do not (Sinclair and Cleland, 2007; Hao and Tsikerdekis, 2019). Given how helpful feedback can be, it is perhaps surprising that students often ignore or dismiss it (Handley, Price and Millar, 2011). Similarly, Sinclair and Cleland (2007) found that less than half of students do not read the commentary lecturers provide alongside their grades. The vast majority of studies on how students use written feedback are based on feedback by lecturers, rather than learning developers. One of the differences between the two is that the latter is actively sought, whereas lecturer feedback is frequently offered alongside summative assessment.

It is difficult to establish a causal link between writing centre feedback and student grades as there are so many factors at play (Jones, 2001). However, there is research that shows a positive impact on grades, such as that by Loddick and Coulson (2020) who conducted a quantitative analysis of assessment data and writing centre tutorials and found both an increase in grades associated with writing tutorial attendance, as well as an improvement of 2% in subsequent assignments. More broadly, Salazar (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of 82 quantitative studies regarding writing centre impact, which found overall that visitors to writing centres achieve higher grades than those who do not. However, there is also research that shows less impact, for instance Keith et al. (2020) found that though involvement in an experimental class that received writing centre input improved students' writing confidence, it did not impact on grades. So though impact is difficult to assess, it seems likely that in-person learning development feedback does tangibly improve performance.

In addition to that received in-person, students value the ability to receive good quality written feedback (Winstone et al., 2016), and Hattie and Clarke (2018) established that the most effective form of feedback focuses on what next and how to move forward. Students particularly value feedback that is detailed and personal. This is because their work is special to them, and having invested so much time in it, they expect the same from the person responding (Glazzard and Stones, 2019). Writing centre feedback is formative, rather than summative, and Butler (1988) found that separating feedback from grades helps to improve student performance. In the same vein, Winstone and Boud (2022) discuss a range of issues arising from the entanglement of grades and feedback. The primary, formal feedback students receive from lecturers is alongside their grades when they have submitted work to Turnitin, so writing centre feedback, delivered without a grade, is likely to be particularly effective.

Feedback as a source of dissatisfaction

Perhaps because students value feedback so much, the quality of feedback in HE is one of the biggest causes of student dissatisfaction (Blair et al., 2013; Beaumont, Moscrop and Canning, 2016), with lecturers frequently believing that their feedback is more useful than students find it (Carless, 2006). Blair et al. (2013) claim that student dissatisfaction centres around the timeliness of feedback, and a lack of opportunity to engage with the feedback

as active participants. Lecturers might have to be contacted multiple times, with students feeling that their opportunities for feedback are limited (Blair and McGinty, 2013), and lecturers' comments can also be more about justifying grades rather than the development of student skills (Winstone and Boud, 2022). Conversely, Hoon (2009) found that students are typically happy with the effectiveness of feedback received from writing centres.

One of the downsides to written feedback for learning developers is that unlike in face-to-face appointments, one cannot gauge the student's reaction through an assessment of nonverbal cues (Dison and Collett, 2019). We do not have control over the feedback environment when students receive written feedback, and it is a complex process to manage elements of tone to create a feeling of safety through friendly but distanced language (Jolly and Boud, 2013). This is important as 'feedback… can crush their confidence, destroy their motivation and render them impotent for future learning' (Burke and Pietrick, 2010, p.3). Feedback is an emotive business, provoking a range of responses, from 'gratitude, appreciation, pride and happiness ...[to]... anger, frustration, embarrassment, fear and sadness' (Rowe, Fitness and Wood, 2014). Hyland (1998) says that through dialogue, misunderstandings that exacerbate these negative responses can be overcome. This would be helpful as Ryan and Henderson (2018) learned that students ignore feedback that provokes negative emotions. As written feedback is a one-way communication process, there may well be a greater opportunity for misunderstanding, as dialogue is removed.

The process of receiving feedback can be a challenge in itself, but for students with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, this can be particularly pronounced. Whilst many learning developers are not trained in how to support students with dyslexia, these students often turn to the writing centre in addition to other forms of help. A disproportionate number of students studying creative practice subjects have dyslexia compared with students in other fields (Bacon and Bennett, 2013), and may lack confidence, particularly when having to read and write when others are present (Pino and Mortari, 2014). In addition, Mortimore and Crozier (2006) found that students with dyslexia find it difficult to make notes and listen at the same time , which will affect how they process verbal feedback. However, these students place great value on the support offered to them by their university (Sumner, Crane and Hill, 2021).

In conclusion, feedback is one of the main mechanisms that helps students rectify their mistakes and improve their work. Feedback that focuses on how to move forward is the most effective form to help them close the gap between their current performance and the performance required for the task. However, student dissatisfaction with feedback is a common problem in higher education, and seeking to explore how students feel about written feedback from the writing centre will address this by helping to inform good practice in this field.

Method

The writing centre conducts an evaluation week annually where students are asked to evaluate their one-to-one appointments. However, an evaluation of written feedback has not previously been sought. In the summer of 2021, it was decided to evaluate students' responses to e-mail feedback to assess how useful they found it, and how it might be improved.

Students who had sent their work to the writing centre for written feedback during the academic year 2020-2021 were identified through the department's e-mail management system. All 249 students who had sent an essay for e-mail feedback were contacted and invited to complete an online survey using Google Forms (see Appendix A), and two reminder e-mails were sent to encourage participation.

It was made clear to participants that their names would not be linked to their questionnaire responses, and the team would not be aware if they had or had not responded to the questionnaire. They were told that responding would not affect any future feedback they might receive. They were also offered an alternative person to contact if they wished to respond outside of the research project. Participation was on an 'opt-in' basis, to avoid students having to refuse to take part. This study received approval from the university's ethics committee.

The questionnaire contained nine items containing both closed and open-ended questions as suggested by Singer and Couper (2017). Open ended questions were included to supplement the quantitative data from closed questions with more detailed and nuanced responses. The questions asked: if the right quantity of feedback had been delivered; how

easy the feedback was to apply; if the students have subsequently used the feedback for other assignments; how students felt about the feedback; and how the feedback could be improved. The questionnaire was kept brief to increase the completion rate.

54 students completed the survey, which was a response rate of 21.6%. 31.5% of respondents were 1st years, 9% were 2nd years, 29.6% were 3rd years, and 29.6% were studying for an MA. This means that 2nd year students were underrepresented in the survey and MA students were overrepresented in comparison to overall student numbers at the university.

Interviews were incorporated in order to gather data that respondents might not have thought to provide in response to the questionnaire. 19 respondents said that they were happy to be contacted for a follow-up interview and 11 interviews were carried out. Interviews were carried out at the very end of the academic year over a two-week period. Not all of the 19 were spoken to due to availability during the interview timescale.

Interviews were semi-structured (see Appendix B for prompt questions) and totalled 225.79 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed using Tactiq transcription software. Interview data were coded using Taguette, an open-access qualitative research tool. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to guide the coding and theming of data with two rounds of coding being conducted. Themes were determined inductively through comparison across the interviews. The themes were then checked against the data set and refined.

Findings and discussion

Questionnaire

Students were asked how they would describe the amount of feedback they had received, to assess if we should make the feedback more concise or more in-depth. There were three options to choose from, and 90.7% said that ‘there was the right amount of feedback’. 5.6% chose ‘disappointing: there was not enough feedback’, and 3.7% chose ‘overwhelming: there was too much feedback’. Therefore, it seems that we are providing the right amount of feedback, and the fear that too much detail is offered by responding in full paragraphs is unfounded.

When letting us know how easy they had found it to apply the feedback, again students were able to choose from closed-ended options, with 93.1% of the students selecting that it was ‘easy’ or ‘somewhat easy’ to apply. One response to a later open-ended question asking how students feel about the feedback said, ‘the feedback was really helpful and very in-depth. The way the feedback is set out makes it incredibly easy to transfer into my essays.’ In addition to applying the feedback to the piece of work they had sent in, 88.9% of the students had been able to apply the feedback they received to subsequent pieces of work. This indicates that students are not simply using the writing centre as a proofreading service but are learning more broadly about academic writing.

In response to the question ‘how did you feel about the feedback you received?’ the response was very positive, with 83.3% of comments positive; 33.3% of respondents who made positive comments used the word ‘helpful’. Reasons that people felt positive about the feedback were centred around clarity, thoroughness and speed of response, and students expressed gratitude for the service. 11.1% of responses regarding how students felt about the feedback were mixed, with a variety of positive and negative comments, and 3.7% were negative. The two most common negatives were that the feedback was too vague and that there were inconsistencies in feedback response between different advisors. Overall, 59.26% of respondents felt there was nothing we could do to improve the service, however, more than one student suggested that feedback could be more specific.

Interviews

Three themes were identified from the data: students’ motivation for contacting the writing centre; students’ reaction to the feedback they received; and the broader feedback context within which the writing centre operates.

Students’ motivation to request written feedback

In the interviews, students discussed a range of motivations for requesting written feedback. They also examined their reactions to our feedback, both emotional and practical. Feedback from other sources was discussed and the writing centre was

compared to both lecturers and friends/family. Overall, students were positive about the help they had received, consistent with Hoon's review of writing centre research which found that writing centres are regarded positively by students (2009).

Regarding the motivation for accessing written feedback rather than online one-to-one appointments, 8 of the 11 students said that the request for written feedback was an active choice: some felt that written feedback was more convenient; there were no appointments available; or it was too close to their deadline for an appointment. In addition, there were others who prefer written feedback, as this gives them more opportunity to process and re-read the information.

Some students particularly identified their dyslexia as a reason they preferred written feedback. They said that during one-to-ones their focus is on trying to capture what was said and make notes, leaving less 'headspace' available for making sense of the feedback. One student said, 'although I might make notes when I go and talk to someone, it's not the same as being able to see the points written down, because the feedback is so helpful, I can work through it'. This mirrors the findings of Mortimore and Crozier (2006) who researched the ability of students with dyslexia to simultaneously listen and make notes. This idea of being able to work through the feedback at the students' own pace was a key benefit identified by those who prefer written feedback.

Some of the students who found there to be positive benefits to written over verbal feedback, were those who like to approach their work in a systematic way. One student said that written feedback meant that she had time to go through her work methodically with highlighters, consider the points of feedback, and see where the feedback could be applied. Then when writing subsequent essays, she ensured that this feedback was incorporated so that she would not receive the same feedback twice. Another student spoke of having a spreadsheet that logged any feedback received in order to apply it to future work. The feedback as a stand-alone document independent of the essay at hand contributes to becoming a self-regulated learner (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), and shows the kind of reflective engagement that is often absent from the feedback process (Handley, Price and Millar, 2011). Students are able to revisit the feedback, allowing them to better process and apply it to subsequent assignments, and so proactively take control of their learning.

How students felt about the feedback they received

Though it is difficult to evaluate writing centre impact on grades (Jones, 2001), students themselves were quick, and keen, to attribute high grades to our help. One said, ‘and actually I got a first…So I was actually made up about that and … I couldn't believe it, you know, absolutely couldn't believe it… But I know that your help helped me get that grade’. Another student said, ‘I have received upwards of 80% in each of my submissions so I'm sure the writing centre have contributed in some way’. This type of feedback was consistent between the questionnaire and the interviews and supports previous research that shows that students who seek feedback receive higher grades (Sinclair and Cleland, 2007).

One very positive aspect that students talked about in interviews was that they really felt that they could see the effort we had put into writing their feedback. One said, ‘it shows you there's genuine care there on your part and you guys want to see us improving and getting better. And that's a really nice feeling’. Another said that the feedback was very personal and that the slightly more informal, introductory paragraph at the start, along with the advisor’s name at the end, contributed to how they felt about the feedback. Another said, ‘it feels like we're really cared for’ and another, ‘it was clear that they really read what I'd written and were really thoughtful’. The personal nature of the feedback was cited as a reason that students felt comfortable contacting us with follow-up questions when they did so. Whilst not resulting in the kind of dialogue Blair and McGinty (2013) say is key to effective learning, it does go some way to mitigate some of the downsides of written feedback, such as not being able to build rapport, check for understanding, or read body language. The sense of the feedback as signifying care by the organisation was an unexpected finding, particularly as so few students reply to the feedback e-mails sent by the team.

The care they feel may be since we do genuinely take time to give a thoughtful and careful response. This may be enhanced by the fact that the feedback is delivered in a letter format, often around a side of A4, in which the student is addressed person to person, rather than the alternative of feedback being via comments on their essay. In addition, this research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the previously normal

channels of informal feedback through conversations in classes on campus were limited. Feedback from the writing centre might have felt more significant to the students, and improved feelings of belonging, that had suffered at this time.

Although most of the interviewees were very positive about their feedback from the writing centre, two of the interviewees were unhappy. One said she felt ‘devastated’ on reading the feedback, as she had worked very hard on the assignment and expected to receive positive comments. She did not feel her hard work had been acknowledged. Another said that it really affected her confidence, supporting what Burke and Pietrick (2010) found regarding the consequences of damaging feedback. This student felt that the effort she had put into her work had not been acknowledged. Also, her feedback was very similar to that sent to her friend, which made it feel ‘robotic’ and like it had been simply cut and pasted. Both of these points support Glazzard and Stones’ (2019) findings that a personal response is important to students. Therefore, when they feel that this is absent, it affects their perception of the quality of the feedback: if it has not been written personally for them, they feel it is not relevant and helpful.

Students said they had applied their feedback to subsequent essays so the work that writing centre tutors do can accurately be termed feedforward (Duncan, 2007). Referencing was an aspect of the feedback that students felt particularly able to apply to subsequent essays. Perhaps students can more easily articulate this sort of learning, whereas concepts such as analysis or critical thinking are more nebulous. One student mentioned that the learning from the feedback often ‘rubs off unconsciously’, so referencing may become an aspect that students are more conscious about and find easier to recall. This idea that students use terms such as ‘referencing’ as a proxy for higher-level skills was explored by Archer (2008) who studied the help students received from a writing centre. There were cases where the student felt they had received help with referencing, despite analysis of first and final drafts of their work showing little improvement in referencing. The greater improvement actually lay in the argument. So, the feedback that the writing centre is giving students, such as adding citations and using academic references, might help them to develop argument and analysis in a way that is not immediately clear to the student. It could be that which we call argument and analysis, students think of as being about using academic references, as both are centred on evidence.

The broader context within which the writing centre operates

In addition to contacting the writing centre, students discussed a range of feedback sources such as friends, family and academics. Students turn to a wide range of sources for advice, as they accept and learn from people they trust and in a place where they feel safe (Ryan and Henderson, 2018). It was notable that everybody who sent their work to friends and family for feedback, unprompted, gave that person's credentials: an older brother who's a lecturer; a mother who's an author; an aunt who works for a publisher, and so on. Students are discerning when looking for feedback and make active choices about who to listen to and who to trust. One concern felt by writing centre tutors when composing feedback is that students are sending their work through in a passive way, so it was positive to hear about their contact with the writing centre being one of a range of active choices made in feedback seeking behaviour.

All interviewees were asked in what ways the feedback they received from the writing centre differed from the feedback they have received from lecturers. Students consistently noted that the lecturers gave subject specific knowledge, whereas the writing centre gave feedback on writing skills, such as paragraph structure, which the students felt was the sort of thing that lecturers would not typically mention. As writing centre advisors are not subject specialists, we do not give subject specific advice and it was good to hear that this distinction was clear to students. Students sometimes reported difficult relationships with their lecturers that can taint the feedback process: 'my card is marked!', 'when you get feedback from lecturers, they assassinate you'. The writing centre, in contrast, is perceived as a neutral space as one interviewee commented: 'I can see that … you know, you guys haven't got an ego problem'. This finding is consistent with the literature that discusses some of the difficult emotions triggered by feedback (Burke and Pietrick, 2010; Rowe, Fitness and Wood, 2014). The idea that feedback from the writing centre felt less emotionally charged might be a result of the formative feedback process being separate from grades.

Limitations

The chief limitation of this study lies in its location in a single institution. It would be informative to discover how responses might differ elsewhere, where the student profile, learning needs, and subject focus might differ. This study did not analyse the feedback that was sent to students to see if there was a relationship between aspects such as the length of the feedback and how students felt about it. Furthermore, this study only analysed student responses to one type of writing centre written feedback, provided in letter format, written in full paragraphs. Within the team, there is a debate as to whether we should provide feedback on the student essay document through comments and further research could investigate the impact of different formats of feedback.

Practice recommendations

This research has informed practice within the team in that it has resolved debate concerning the level of detail and format of written feedback. We have been reminded to focus on positive comments and the personal element, even during busy times when these can be the first thing to be dropped. We now all provide direct quotations from the student essay when giving feedback, which addresses the concern regarding inconsistency between advisors, and the desire for feedback to be specific. Although this research was centred on written feedback, its biggest impact in changing practice within the team has been on in-person appointments. The insight into how students with dyslexia and processing difficulties can struggle to deal with talking, listening, reading and writing in tandem, has made us consciously allow more time, and silence, to allow for this.

Conclusion

In this research, the participants articulated their motivations for contacting the writing centre for written feedback and provided their views about the feedback. One question that prompted this research was the concern that perhaps the feedback sent was overwhelming and demotivating. However, students told us that they like this level of detail, and this shows that we, and by extension the university, cares about them. Some students, particularly those with dyslexia, prefer written feedback as they have additional time to process information. Students were grateful for the support from the writing centre and felt that the written feedback helped improve their grades. Although the participants'

comments were overwhelmingly positive, when students were unhappy with their feedback, a deep impression was made on them that damaged their confidence. Students differentiate between the feedback from the writing centre and academic staff and access our help as one of the active choices they make when seeking to improve their work. Where students preferred written feedback over verbal feedback, this was often due to the difficulties that students with dyslexia have in appointments when they are trying to read their work, listen to feedback, ask questions, and make notes, all at the same time.

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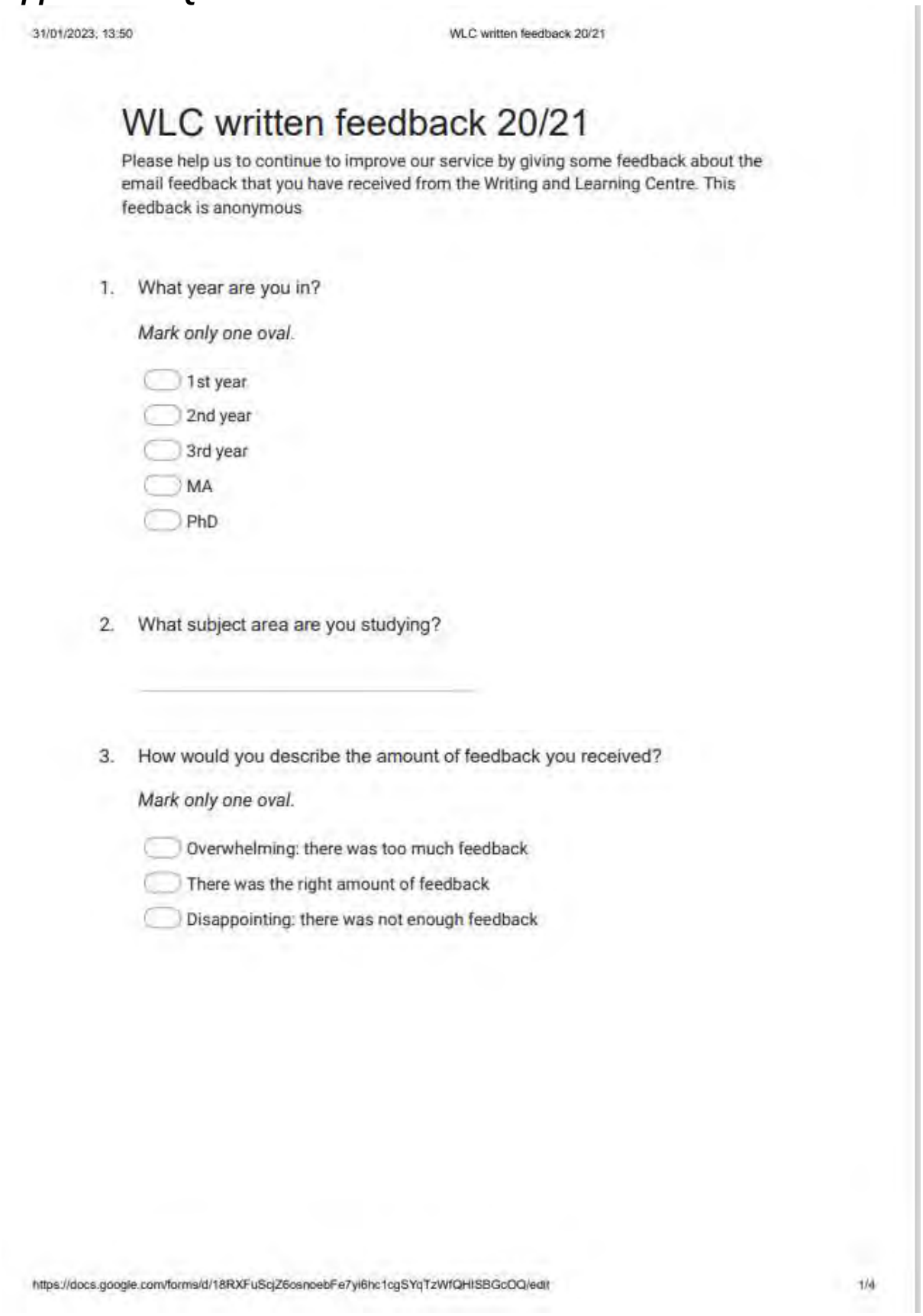
Appendix A: Questionnaire



31/01/2023, 13:50 WLC written feedback 20/21

WLC written feedback 20/21

Please help us to continue to improve our service by giving some feedback about the email feedback that you have received from the Writing and Learning Centre. This feedback is anonymous

1. What year are you in?

Mark only one oval.

- 1st year
- 2nd year
- 3rd year
- MA
- PhD

2. What subject area are you studying?

3. How would you describe the amount of feedback you received?

Mark only one oval.

- Overwhelming: there was too much feedback
- There was the right amount of feedback
- Disappointing: there was not enough feedback

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/18RXFuScjZ6osnoebFe7yi6hc1cgSYqTzWfQHISBGcOQ/edit 1/4

4. How easy did you find it to apply the feedback to the essay you had submitted?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Very easy
- ◯ Somewhat easy
- ◯ Somewhat difficult
- ◯ Very difficult

5. Have you applied the principles of academic writing that were described in the feedback you were given, to any other written work that you have completed since?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

6. How did you feel about the feedback you received?

_____

7. What would have made this feedback more helpful for you?

_____

8. If you would like to elaborate on any of your answers then please do so here:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

9. Would you be happy to be contacted for a follow up interview via Google hangouts (approximately 20mins)?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

10. If yes please add your name here (this Google form will not link your name to any of the answers above, so your responses will remain anonymous)

_____

11. I confirm that I have read and understood the information form and consent forms for this study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Appendix B: Prompt questions for semi-structured interviews regarding written feedback

- What year are you in?
- How many essays did you send through for written feedback?
- Did you have any appointments in addition to e-mail feedback?
- Why did you choose to send in your essay for e-mail feedback?
- How did the e-mail feedback compare to an in-person appointment, if you had one?
- To what extent did you understand the feedback?
- How did you find applying it to your essay?
- Was there anything that you disagreed with?
- Have you found yourself applying this feedback to other written work?
- Where else did you seek feedback?
- To what extent is the feedback you get from them similar to or different from, ours?
- How did you feel when you opened the email from us?
- Is there anything we could do to improve our feedback?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add?