

Postgraduate Students' Views of Feedback in a University-Based Nursing Education Institution in Kwazulu-Natal

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Abstract: Postgraduate programmes prepare nurses and midwives for advanced nurse practice. They value the nature of feedback they receive as it strengthens their capacity in functioning as advanced or specialist nurse level. The effective of their learning depends on the nature and quality of feedback provided. Feedback, especially formative feedback plays a crucial role in shaping how students learn and how they perform academically. Most of the literature on feedback is in general education not nursing education at postgraduate level. More importantly, the existing research mainly focuses on educators' perspective, leaving out the perspective of the consumers of feedback; the students. The sources of data in this study were postgraduate nursing students. The findings revealed positive and negative aspects regarding feedback. The commonly used methods included written, verbal, peer, electronic and sometimes telephonic feedback. Peer feedback was less favored by the participants. Feedback provided seemed constructive in nature, motivating, promoting personal growth, and providing direction to some degree. Guidance however seemed limited, taking into consideration its value in informing the learning process. Some concerns were raised about timing of feedback, and the content of feedback as according to more than half of the participants it mainly informed them of inaccuracies. The conclusion drawn from this study was that there is a need to adequately prepare both the students and the lecturers on feedback and to strengthen the positive practices that were highlighted in order to ensure that comments made feed forward to future assessment.

Keywords: feedback, feedforward, feedback loop, postgraduate student, nursing students

I. Introduction

Postgraduate programmes prepare registered nurses for advanced nurse practice role, equipping graduates with context informed expert knowledge base, complex decision-making skills and competencies for expanded practice as stated by ICN (2002). Students in postgraduate nursing programmes are considered as adult [1]. As adult learners, postgraduate students should bring professional knowledge and experience to the learning environment and they immediately apply what they are learning to practice [2]. In order for the students to benefit fully from the learning experience regular performance feedback is required. Feedback should provide the student with information on current practice and offer practical advice for improved performance [3]. Education of nurses and midwives in various specialty nursing categories such as clinical nurse specialists, and advanced specialists requires clarification in such a way that specialist/clinical advanced nursing and midwifery practice are clearly delineated [5]. In order to achieve this, providing constant feedback to students is pivotal to avoid the ambiguities and role confusion that exist with regard to specialist and clinically advanced nursing/midwifery practice globally and in most healthcare settings [5].

The Council on Higher Education programme accreditation guidelines as well as the South African Nursing Council Education and Training guidelines clearly stipulate that education and training institutions should have comprehensive assessment policies in place. The assessment policy in the higher education of interest in this study places emphasis on the importance of feedback and how it should be used to enhance learning and promote best practices.

Assessment in this policy is regarded as the process of gathering information to improve student learning through formative and summative judgments. This policy provides clear guidelines on how feedback to students should be managed; that it must be adequate, sufficiently detailed, and constructive in nature, the students should not wait more than 20 working days for feedback, and they should be able to act on the feedback from the assessment before undertaking examinations [4].

The university-based nursing education institution where this study was conducted embraces progressive education philosophies in its postgraduate programmes and adult learning principles underpin the teaching, learning and assessment practices. The programmes are student centred in nature, promoting self-direction and

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active learning. The main aim is to facilitate the development of the discipline specific competencies and the transferable core skills. All modules are on an online learning platform (Moodle) and uses both synchronised and asynchronised approaches to cater for the diverse learning needs of postgraduate students. Feedback in such programmes is critical to facilitate ongoing independent learning. Montgomery and Baker [5] emphasize that the students regard feedback as an important part of their self-regulated learning because it gives them an opportunity to match their level of development against the feedback provided. It is one of the most powerful tools influencing students' learning and achievement [6]. Literature however reveals a number of challenges with the provision of feedback to students. Hence, the need to explore and describe students' perception of feedback in a postgraduate nursing education programme.

II. Reviewed literature

The concept feedback is used in different contexts and defined differently. In this paper feedback is viewed as integral to the learning loop and assessment cycle [7, 8]. It is information provided to students about their current performance or understanding of the assessment task. It highlights strengths and gaps in the actual performance against a set or expected standard of performance to enhance learning [9, 10]. Feedback is also known as 'feed forward' because rather than only feeding back on completed tasks, it also provides information into future tasks and how performance may be enhanced in the following tasks [11].

In line with the SANC requirement, when providing feedback that there should be adequate time for remedial action. A number of authors [12-14] assert that feedback should provide students with an opportunity to reflect on their development at a cognitive, affective and behavioral level and assists them effect necessary adjustments to improve in their future performance. Feedback provided should be meaningful, understood and correctly acted upon [15]. The feedback process should also provide students with an opportunity to engage in the discussion of their feedback [12, 15]. Research on feedback commonly cites quantity, quality, appropriateness and timeliness of the feedback as significant variables that influence how students act on the feedback they receive [10, 12].

There are different types of feedback including oral, written, telephonic, electronic, self and peer feedback [13, 16]. Traditionally feedback was provided by teachers, but with a paradigm shift to student centred learning, peer and self-feedback are gaining popularity [17]. Peer feedback however appears to be ranked lowest by students compared to feedback by the educators because of inadequate preparation of students for this role and the issues of trust and professionalism amongst students [18].

Research reveals a number of principles to be observed for feedback to be effective, useful and give a clear sense of direction to the students. These principles include that feedback should be (a) comprehensible, constructive, focused on students' performance and their learning than on students themselves [11, 12, 19]; (b) timely and feed forward while the students have time to act upon it to improve their performance [12, 13, 17]; (c) fair, real and honest [20] and (d) sufficient in frequency and detail [17]. Evidence shows that teachers understanding of feedback influences the type and quality of feedback they provide [17] and often students often do not understand the feedback given by lecturers and are therefore unable to take the necessary action to close the learning gap [21]. Feedback may be "both productive and harmful if carried out without some knowledge of the feedback process" [6:137]. Good feedback is linked to positive benefits of learning and to making considerable difference to the quality of learning [9].

Gielen and Peeters [22] warn that not all feedback leads to academic performance improvement and sometimes feedback provided has negative effect on the students' attitude and performance especially if it draws away from the assessment task and focus on their personal attributes and characteristics [12]. Students in a number of studies however reported that sometimes they do not fully understand the feedback provided or how to translate it into action because of the quality and how it is presented [9, 15, 20]. Sometimes the students are confused by the language used by the assessors and the statements used do not give clear direction to the students to assist them improve their performance [23]. Cited examples of such statements include "this does not make sense", "be more critical", "you need to think carefully about your structure". Students fail to make sense of such statement [21]. A part of the problem with feedback is that some of the lecturers and students see it in isolation from other aspects of the teaching and learning process [24].

Contextual factors in the education institutions impact on assessment and feedback practices. Yorke [25] is of the view that the quality of assessment in general and feedback in particular is increasingly under threat due to rapidly increasing student numbers, heavy volume of marking and unending resource constraints in academic institutions. Staff time is becoming a scarce resource as the workload of the lecturer multiplies year on year. All these impact on the quality, quantity, pace, timing and effectiveness of feedback provided [26]. Some education programmes have opted to reduce the number of assessments because marking is so time consuming that the rapid return of scripts is not always possible [26]. Furthermore, according to Harland [27] some students are only interested in their grades and not in the detailed feedback provided on the assessment. This often leads to lecturers

correcting the same mistakes over and over and writing the same comments many times, which is also very time consuming.

Quality feedback is fundamental to meaningful and effective learning, especially in education programmes that are student centered, promoting self-direction and active learning. Evidence also shows an association between high-quality positive feedback, higher grades and better student performance [20] as feedback is used as a tool to enhance learning and academic performance. Literature however reveal some challenges with regards to feedback practices that impact on the intended purpose of feedback. The postgraduate programme of interest in this study embraces progressive teaching and learning philosophies with students taking a lead in their studies and academics serving as facilitators of the learning process.

The purpose of this study was therefore to analyze postgraduate students' view of feedback provided in a postgraduate nursing education programme.

III. Research Methodology

A quantitative descriptive design was adopted in this study as this design is systematic in nature, objective, explores and describes what exists, determines the frequency with which the phenomenon occurs and document characteristics of the phenomenon of interest as it occurs in real life [28]. This research was conducted in one of the University-based Nursing Education Institutions in KwaZulu-Natal. The population included all postgraduate students (N=81) who were registered for course work modules, studying either full time or part time. All students were requested to participate because of the limited pool of students registered for coursework courses. The participants were purposively selected because of their exposure to feedback provided on their assignments, tests, projects, online learning activities and other forms of assessment tasks. The data collection tool was developed using items derived from literature and Weaver's [29] data collection tool was used as a guiding framework in developing the tool that was appropriate to this study. The instrument had seven subsections; demographic data with five items, types of feedback commonly used and whether that type facilitated learning (6 items), criteria used in feedback (15 items), ability to understand feedback provided (8 items), nature of feedback received (8 items), students' perceptions of the feedback received (7) and how students dealt with feedback received (6 items). This paper focuses on the types of feedback commonly used, criteria used in feedback, nature of feedback received and perceptions of feedback received. The tool was subjected to the scrutiny of the experts in nursing education and research for content validity and the items on the questionnaire were aligned to the research objectives. A test-retest was conducted for reliability with a tool administered twice to second year postgraduate students who were not part of the study over a two weeks' interval period.

About 81 self-administered questionnaires were distributed to all the participants, but only 55 were returned, giving a response rate of 68%. According Babbie and Mouton [30] a response rate of 50% is fairly good, while that of 60% and 70% is very good. Data was organized and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), version 17.0. Data was measured in terms of frequency distribution and percentages. Data was collected after obtaining ethical clearance from the University Research Ethics Board, permission from the Head of School and informed consent from the participants.

IV. Results

Commonly used types feedback and their usefulness

The results showed that commonly used types of feedback in a postgraduate programme included written (96%), verbal (98%), peer (73%) and electronic (78%). The participants were requested to indicate the usefulness of each type of feedback they had received. They were requested to choose between three responses of *fully*, *partially* and *not at all*. *Fully* meant the feedback had been comprehensive and had contained information that the student could use, understand and reflect on. *Partially* meant that the student had received partial feedback on tests or assignments or that feedback had been given, but without clear direction. *Not at all*, meant that the student had never received any of the feedback indicated.

The majority (69%) of the participants indicated that written feedback was comprehensive and contained information that the student could use understand and reflect on (See Figure1). Verbal feedback was found by 60% of the participants to be comprehensive, containing information they can use, understandable and they can reflect on. Responses on the usefulness of electronic feedback were spread almost equally between fully (40%) and partially (38%), with only 15% indicating that they had not found it at all useful. Results showed that 29% of the participants found peer feedback comprehensive, containing information they can use, understandable and they can reflect on and 44% found peer feedback to be incomplete and less informative, with 20% finding it not at all useful. Forty percent (40%) found electronic feedback to be comprehensive, useful and understandable.

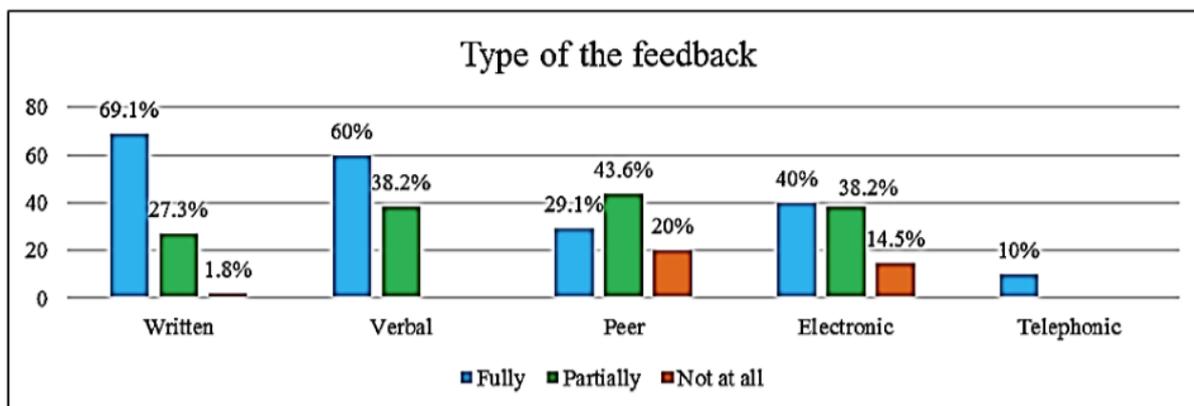


Figure 1: Modes of providing feedback and their usefulness

Criteria observed in feedback

Regarding the criteria that was observed in giving feedback, the participants had to choose a response ranging between always and never to describe how often each of 15 criteria was observed in feedback they had received. The results were mostly positive with the majority of participants responding always and usually, as reflected in Table 1. Most of the participants indicated that feedback that was clearly written (34.5% responding always and 38.2% usually), easy to read (38.2% always and 41.8% usually), related to learning outcomes (38.2% always and 47.3% usually), appropriate to the mark given (23.6% always and 45.5% usually), informative and helpful (32.7% always and 40% usually), provided positive comments (29.1% always and 32.7% usually), provided an action plan to improve (12.7% always and 40% usually) and was provided timeously before examinations (21.8% always and 40% usually). Most of the participants responded that the language used in the feedback was simple and friendly (38% always and 38% usually), that verbal feedback had been provided privately (33% always and 25.5% usually, and that it related to assessment criteria (34.5% always and 34.5% usually). Less than half of the participants indicated that the feedback they had received had only shown marks or grades (12.7% always and 30.9% usually) and had focused mainly on technical errors (14.5 always and 25.5 usually).

Table 1 Criteria observed in Feedback

Criteria	Always%	Usually%	Sometimes %	Seldom %	Never %
Clearly written	34.5	38.2	25.5	1.8	0
Easy to read	38.2	41.8	18.2	1.8	0
Related to the learning outcomes	38.2	47.3	10.9	1.8	1.8
Related to the assessment criteria	34.5	34.5	20.0	7.3	1.8
In relation to the expected outcomes	30.9	47.3	14.5	7.3	0
Appropriate to the mark given	23.6	45.5	29.1	1.8	0
Shows marks or grades only	12.7	30.9	34.5	7.3	14.5
Informative and helpful	32.7	40.0	18.2	7.3	1.8
Provided positive comments	29.1	32.7	30.9	5.5	1.8
Provided action plan to improve	12.7	40.0	30.9	9.1	7.3
Detailed and provide direction	16.4	32.7	36.4	10.9	3.6
Provided timeously before exams	21.8	40.0	29.1	7.3	1.8
Focused mainly on technical errors	14.5	25.5	38.2	16.4	5.5
Simple and friendly language used	38.2	38.2	20.0	3.6	0
Verbal feedback provided privately	32.7	25.5	18.2	7.3	16.4

The nature of feedback

The majority of participants were positive about the nature of feedback provided. About 72% strongly disagreed with the statement that feedback provided was destructive in nature, 62.8% strongly agreed that feedback increased motivation, 60% strongly agreed that feedback promoted personal growth and 55% stated that feedback helped to boost their confidence and self-esteem. The majority of participants disagreed that feedback was personal in nature (14.5% slightly disagreed and 45.5% strongly disagreed), confusing with no clear direction (25.5% slightly disagreed and 40% strongly disagreed) and that praise was rare (21.8 slightly disagreed and 50.9 strongly disagreed). The only negative aspect cited by the participants on the nature of feedback was that feedback mainly informed them of inaccuracies (21.8% strongly agreed and 29.1% slightly agreed).

Table 2: Nature of feedback

	Strongly Agree %	Slightly Agree %	Slightly Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
Promotes personal growth	60	32.7	3.6	36
Increases motivation	61.8	23.6	10.9	3.6
Boost confidence and self esteem	54.5	25.5	14.5	5.5
Confusing with no clear direction	5.5	29.1	25.5	40.0
Personal in nature	21.8	18.2	14.5	45.5
Mainly informs about inaccuracies	21.8	29.1	20	29.1
Praise is rare	14.5	12.7	21.8	50.9
Destructive in nature	3.6	9.1	14.5	72.2

V. Discussion of findings

This study revealed four types of feedback commonly used in a postgraduate programme; written, verbal, electronic and peer, with written feedback being the most commonly used method. Using different types of feedback is recommended because that caters for a broader range of student with different preferences and learning styles [31]. Although written feedback is commonly used, a study by Race and Brown [31] revealed added benefits of verbal feedback in that it promotes interaction and engagement between the students and the nurse educator and it provides platform to explain or clarify some part of feedback that are not clear. Written feedback if not accompanied by discussion with lecture is subject to multiple interpretations by the student. Electronic feedback according to Thorpe [32] may also be favored as it is 'identity focused', 'individualized' and 'interpersonal', and making use of this method can initiate significant shifts in the relationship between students and lecturers. The students may access feedback wherever they are at their earliest convenience, its timely and legible [33]. Thorpe further adds that through the medium of electronic mail lecturers may convey a personal style with warmth, encouragement, enthusiasm, humour and sentiment that illustrates an understanding of the learner as an individual related to the stage of learning they have reached in the module.

In this study, peer feedback was identified as the least useful and not very effective. In line with these findings, Penny and Grover cited in Heywood [34] are of the view that peers, with no special training on giving feedback, are not qualified to critique the work of other students. There is also a tendency for peers to under-mark, thus making this method unpopular. Hanrahan and Isaacs [35] revealed that peer feedback assessment methods were unlikely to be successful during early years of study because students lack experience, both in the sense of course content and in accurately gauging the level of performance. Smyth [36] suggests that students should be guided on how to give informative and constructive peer feedback in order to make more use of this method.

Criteria observed in providing feedback to students

Although the results were mostly positive, the spread of the responses was not convincing about the level of nurse educators' expertise in using feedback as a tool to support their teaching. This statement is based on the reasoning that if the students had found the feedback to be fully comprehensive and helpful, a larger majority of participants would have indicated so, and the responses being less spread over the range. The overall impression about findings related to the criteria observed is that nurse educators' need to strengthen their practice in this area of feedback. One of the positive findings of this area, however, was that a large number of participants indicated that they had received private verbal feedback (32.7% always and 25.5% usually). This is crucial in a postgraduate nursing programme with adult students because, for personal reasons, they value privacy and prefer to engage in discussion with the nurse educator for clarification [15]. Private verbal feedback gives mature learners the opportunity to develop action plans to improve on their performance and becomes part of their lifelong learning. Through such engagement there is shared reflection and reciprocal learning through a professional partnership [37], facilitating the academic and personal growth of the student.

Delivering feedback is a skill to be mastered by nurse educators to ensure that feedback is constructive in nature. This study revealed that feedback that had been received was generally constructive (72.2%). Feedback is important to students because they are interested in knowing how they have communicated their ideas and thoughts on paper and whether such thoughts were clearly and effectively articulated. Constructive feedback, according to Peterson and Irving [38], has the potential to improve learning outcomes as it offers guidance, rather than empty praise and encouragement.

Timing of feedback is important to its success and immediate feedback is believed to enhance the utility of the feedback message for the recipient [13]. In this particular study, timeliness of feedback was a particular concern because, according to some of the participants, it had sometimes been very late, even after the examinations in some cases. Feedback is more effective when it is timely as it allows students more time to work on their limitations and improve their performance deficits prior to a formal assessment [13, 36]. If feedback is not provided on time, opportunities to improve learning and to reinforce some lessons and for students to experience the fruits of the change are missed [39]. Feedback that comes just at the time when it is needed is more likely to make a difference than feedback that arrives much later (or earlier). This has to do with the feedback's

relevance to the recipient's need and the corresponding attention it will be afforded. It also relates to the notion of a learning horizon whereby, if the consequences (feedback) following some action are sufficiently detached in time from the action itself, the feedback recipient may not make connection between the two and so may fail to learn from the experience, as stated in Razmov and Vlasheva [39]. With postgraduate students being prepared for advanced or specialist roles, obtaining feedback timeously will provide them with time to apply the feedback received during their experiential learning thus strengthening acquisition of required competencies.

In this study, a large percentage of the participants indicated that the language used in the feedback was simple and friendly, with 38.2% responding always and 38.2%, usually. According to Weaver [29], the language used in feedback has an influence on how students receive and respond to it. The 23.3% of the participants who did not find the language friendly (20% responded sometimes and 3.6%, never), may be as a result of the language used by the assessors which may be difficult for the students to understand. Duncan [40] states that sometimes lecturers use language they assume students will understand, but which in reality students find challenging when trying to interpret and utilize it. Examples of the academic terms commonly used by lectures, according to Duncan, include 'deepen analysis of key issues', 'sharpen critique', 'identify and develop implications' and 'link theory and practice'. To address this challenge Spiller Spiller [41] suggests pre-assessment coaching and preparation of students in the academic language used in assessment. This author is of the view that preparation of the students before assessment opens up the dialogue around assessment and creates the opportunity for developing a shared understanding of feedback terminology, including expectations from both parties.

This study also revealed that the majority of the participants indicated that the feedback they had received was related to the learning outcomes, with 38.2% responding always and 47.3%, usually. Feedback that feeds into the achievement of the learning outcomes is critical because feedback is one of the tools used to measure the current performance and understanding in relation to the set outcomes or performance. Hattie and Timperley [13] assert that the main purpose of feedback is to reduce the gap between current understandings and performance and a goal. Lecturers should therefore craft informative and user-friendly feedback that will feed forward and inform future tasks rather than only feedback to completed assignments [10].

VI. Conclusion

As postgraduate programmes are used to equip graduates with competencies required for advanced or specialist practice, feedback forms part a critical part of the learning process. More importantly, the process of feedback is central to the learning and assessment loop, which is used as a yardstick to measure the performance of the student against the desired outcomes. Feedback, as part of the developmental process, offers both parties (nurse educators and students) an opportunity to reflect on the teaching and learning process. To ensure the provision of effective feedback it is critical to strengthen the capacity of nurse educators in the process of managing assessment and providing feedback. As students are crucial stakeholders in the feedback process, they should be empowered to use feedback as a tool to enhance their learning as it pertains to their development towards the desired performance. Well thought through, planned efforts should be in place to build the capacity of students in understanding the value of feedback and how to utilize it to the best of their ability. This should not be a once off exercise during the orientation period, but rather a continuous practice through the medium of workshops, just as academic writing and study skills are approached. As there are a number of concerns about students giving peer feedback, such platforms may also be used to groom students as peer evaluators, thus not only equipping them with skills to help each other, but also helping them to develop a skill that will remain with them for the rest of their lives.

The area of feedback needs further exploration, especially from the postgraduate students' perspective and rich data may be yielded through research that is qualitative in nature. Future research may also explore the different forms of feedback and their effectiveness in different contexts and in achieving desirable competencies from postgraduate students.

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