

Towards Improving Feedback on Assignment Responses: An Analysis of Students' Experiences in the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)

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Abstract

The study sought to establish the type of comments that distance learners in Zimbabwe Open University receive on assignment responses and to find out the extent to which learners are benefiting from comments on assignment responses. The study used the case study design. The population of the study included all students registered in Mashonaland Central Region who had studied for at least one semester in their respective programmes. A stratified random sample of 80 students from the four faculties in the region was drawn and these students responded to a closed ended questionnaire. Forty (40) marked assignments were randomly selected from the four faculties for document analysis. The study found out that the markers comments fell short of what the students expected. The learners indicated that they do not benefit from assignment feedback. The respondents suggested that the tutors should give comments that direct them to more reading and that the comments should be reflective indicating the strengths and weaknesses of their essays. The study recommended that the university needs to staff develop the markers on a continuous basis and that part of tutorial time be devoted to giving feedback to students concerning their assignments

1. Introduction

Feedback on assignment responses is one of the most important components in the instructional methodology of Distance Education. It forms the backbone of student support service in the Open and Distance Learning System. Feedback has an inbuilt interactive system that is essential in bringing about effective learning. Feedback, therefore, contributes in a major way to the andragogic inputs and its importance can in no way be undermined.

This study analyzes the nature and quality of comments to assignment responses in the distance learning context of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). It delved on the experiences of distance learners enrolled in the four faculties at one of the university's ten regional campuses, Mashonaland Central Region. The purpose of the study was to find out what type of feedback comments were dominant in students' marked assignments, and what meaning the students attached to the comments. The study also sought to establish whether or not the students thought the feedback provision was beneficial to their distance learning process, and lastly required students to suggest the type of feedback which they perceived as beneficial to their learning. A survey design, based on a questionnaire for a sample of registered students was adopted. The study aimed at finding answers to the research questions as follows:

- What types of comments are provided by tutors in marked assignments?
- Do students think that the feedback provision is beneficial to them as distance learners?
- How can tutors improve on the feedback?

Background to the Study

An examination of student feedback as it applies to distance education should usefully start with a discussion of just what role the distance learning tutor is perceived to fulfil within the course. According to Worth (2004), the tutor's role involves negotiating a learning agenda with the student, counseling,

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assisting with the development of study skills and sometimes acting as an individual with whom the student could explore ideas and concepts. In a similar view, Cowan (1998) emphasizes the tutor's role as one of support, involving providing explanations and feedback so that students could judge the strengths and weaknesses of their learning. After interviewing a sample of Open University students in Wales, Morgan and Morris (2001) found out that tutors were highly valued by their distance learners, with the motivating factor well in the fore.

Learning theorists offer a further selection of tutor roles in distance education. Daloz (2005), Brookfield (2003) and Egan (2006) agree that tutors manage a dialogue with the student that is designed to reinforce success, prompt inquisitive thought and to challenge when the student's perception of the course subject matter becomes complacent. They also concur on the view that in conducting such a dialogue with the student, tutors can have a powerful influence over student morale, motivation and self-worth. The emphasis is on written student feedback which is believed to be at the heart of what students expect from their distance learning tutors.

In yet another similar study, Cole, Coats and Lentell (2004) discovered that distance learners hoped to have their work treated with respect, to receive an explanation and justification for the grade awarded and to receive a clear explanation of how they could improve. These researchers further found out that students expected feedback to have a helpful attitude or tone, and to provide appropriate reassurance about abilities, where the student's work was weak.

What is evident in the foregoing discussion is that distance learners tend to perceive specific comments about their strengths and weaknesses of their work, and constructive challenge concerning what could yet be improved as beneficial to their learning. Whilst these student expectations could reasonably be expected to apply to all students, including those on campus-based programmes, they are made more poignant by the limited face-to-face contact that many distance learner's experience. In the view of Beaudoin (1999), the task of the tutor in distance education is much more than merely grading students' submitted assignment but rather the instructional process should involve the following:

- Diagnosing the student's readiness to learn,
- Monitoring the student progress towards objectives sought,
- Recognizing and discovering a student's learning difficulties,
- Stimulating and challenging students to further efforts,
- Evaluating the quality of a student's learning, and
- Assigning a grade to estimate learning outcomes.

However, contrary to what the foregoing authors have argued about feedback, some 130 students and 80 lecturers sampled in a survey at the University of Strathclyde revealed wide discrepancies of perceptions concerning feedback and assessment in their responses (MacLellen, 2001). While most lecturers responded that feedback is frequently helpful, frequently helps students to understand, and frequently helps learning, most students responded that feedback was only sometimes helpful in these ways. In this same study, 30% of students reported that feedback never helps them to understand while 63% of lecturers responded that feedback frequently prompts discussion with a tutor, only 2% of students responded the same way and 50% of students responded that feedback never prompted discussion.

The problem here appears to be with the quantity and quality of feedback such that it is not actually helpful to students after all, tutors have been reported in some studies as having to work under enormous time pressure from both the distance education institution that hires them and their permanent employers, and it is difficult to provide comprehensive and useful feedback under such circumstances (Wotjas, 1998). But there are other problems too. Studies of what students do with tutor comments makes for depressing reading. Feedback is often not read at all (Hounsell, 2007) or not understood (Lea & Street,

1998). Wotjas (1998) reported some students threw away the feedback if they disliked the grade, while others seemed concerned only with the final result or mark and did not collect the marked work.

There is also a problem associated with both marks and feedback being provided simultaneously. A grade is likely to be perceived by the student as indicating his/her personal ability or worth as a person as it is usually 'norm-referenced' and tells him/her, primarily, where he/she stands in relation to others. Thus, a poor grade may damage a student's 'self-efficacy', or sense of ability to be effective. Yorke (2001) elaborates on the positive or negative ways in which feedback on marked assignments can affect student retention and emphasizes its role in 'academic integration'. Thus, in the absence of marks, Yorke (Ibid), it has been reported that students read feedback much more carefully and use it to guide their learning. In the light of this research evidence, some distance education institutions have adopted policies that all assignments should only have feedback and that no marks should be provided. The Alverno College's 'assessment as learning' system is probably the best known example of 'grade-less' assessment.

despite all these contradictions in research findings about how distance learners react to feedback, sufficient evidence appear to suggest that the quality of comments on marked assignments is a significant way to support the academic progress of distance learners and, like other interpersonal communications, should always begin on a positive note to encourage openness and dialogue (Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning, 2011). Tutors may fall into the habit of just identifying the parts of an assignment needing correction, and assuming that the students will know that everything else that they did was fine. This may turn out to be a poor strategy, because students need explicit confirmation of the parts of their assignment that were correct, and to have the strong points acknowledged and reinforced. Positive feedback has been found to consistently give students, particularly distance learners, an accurate idea of their strengths, so that they know what they can build on. Tutors also need to explain, in their comments, why the weak areas fall short of requirements, and suggest some strategies the student can use to improve these areas of their knowledge and skills.

Students can benefit more from tutor comments that are on a positive, hopeful and forward-looking. They can explain how the assignment relates to the next part of the course, recommend ways of building on what has been learned, or suggest resources that match a student's interests (COL, 2003). Tutor-marked assignments (TMAs), therefore, should provide a platform for:

- Giving feedback that is consistent across all the assignments and easy to understand;
- Comments that establishes and maintains a dialogue;
- Comments which indicate errors or misunderstandings with reference to course material, so that the students can check and make their own corrections;
- Comments about the relevance or appropriateness of the content and approach used by the students in answering the assignments;
- Comments which offer support and encouragement;
- Comments on assignment-writing skills and advice on study techniques and strategies;
- Comments which explain the grade/mark that they have been given; and
- General comments on the assignments at the beginning or end as well as specific comments next to relevant sections of the assignments itself (SAIDE, 1998).

This study is, therefore, important to the extent its findings may contribute to improved student support in distance education, and the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), in particular. The study focused on the experiences of distance learners enrolled in four faculties at Mashonaland Central Region, one of the ten Regional Campuses of the university. The aim of the study was be to analyze and describe feedback approaches that were being used and to determine ways of enhancing the type and quality of students' feedback in the university.

Assignment System in the ZOU

The university has four faculties namely,

- Arts and Education

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- Applied Social Sciences
- Science and Technology, and
- Commerce and Law.

Each faculty houses several programmes. All students are expected to write assignments as a pre-condition for entry into examinations. The average number of assignments per course per semester for most of the programmes is usually two, depending on the programme regulations. Assignment questions are provided to students upon registration and due dates are also supplied. The university's regulations demand that course tutors mark their allocated assignments within a period of fourteen days from the day of collection, and also demands that students should be given feedback to the first assignment before the submission of the next.

It should be pointed out that unlike in other Open Universities (COLL, in Namibia), ZOU does not specifically demand a marker's report on the assignments marked or a tutorial letter based on the marked assignments. ZOU too does not specifically provide a guide for commenting on assignments. This is viewed as a quality gap which renders tutor monitoring problematic. It is in this distance learning context that this study sought to establish the type of comments that distance learners in ZOU receive, to find out whether the distance learners are benefiting or not from the comments, and to determine the learners' suggestions regarding the type of comments that they think help them in their learning.

Statement of the Problem

Comments on assignment responses are an effective means of communication between learner and tutor in distance education. If the type and quality of comments is inappropriate, distance learners become more isolated, and less learning takes place. It was important, therefore, to analyze and describe the type and quality of tutor comments to discover evidence for improving students' academic support in the university.

Research Objectives

The study was set out to achieve the following objectives:

- To establish the type of comments that distance learners in ZOU receive on assignment responses.
- To find out whether the distance learners are benefiting or not from comments on assignment responses.
- To determine students' expectations regarding comments on assignment responses.

Significance of the Study

Distance learners are the main beneficiaries of an effective feedback system. The dialogue between the learner and tutor is hoped to improve, the learner becomes more motivated, and is likely to gain a clearer view of his/her strengths and weaknesses. The university too gets important information about performance of tutors, and can plan informed staff development programmes.

The Research Design

There are different research orientations that focus on how knowledge is developed. The two common forms of educational research orientations are the positivist paradigm and the interpretive paradigm. Positivist research emphasizes objectivity and statistical analyses while the interpretive research focuses on subjective multiple realities. Given the nature of this study's research questions that primarily focused on participants' experiences of feedback on assignment responses and its influence on their learning, this study could not be situated in the positivist paradigm but within the interpretive paradigm. The study sought to obtain in-depth understanding of participants in their natural setting and a case study design was, therefore, adopted.

The case study proved to be an appropriate design because of the concern to obtain the in-depth understanding of the reactions of students towards feedback provided by tutors in marked assignments. A case study is also an accepted research strategy and is an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within a real life context using multiple sources (Borg and Gall, 1996).

The population of the study included all students registered in Mashonaland Central Region who had studied through at least one semester in their respective programmes. The condition ensured that all participants had had some experience of receiving feedback on their assignment responses. A stratified random sample of 80 students based on the four faculties in the region was then drawn. Forty (40) marked assignments were also randomly and proportionately selected from the faculties for document analysis.

Research Instruments

The main data collection tool was a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to enable it to obtain data on both closed-ended items with pre-determined alternatives and open-ended responses from the students. An unstructured interview was also be used to gather data on the experiences of ZOU learners regarding feedback type, quality and usefulness as a learning aid. A document analysis checklist was used to analyze comments written in students’ assignment responses. The three data collection methods were adequate in providing data needed to answer the research questions that had been presented. The procedure that was used to collect questionnaire data involved administering the tool to students on a weekend tutorial session. The advantage to this approach was achievement of 100% return rate and reducing travel costs.

3. Presentation of Results

The data being presented in this report is based responses provided by 80 students. It also comes from interviews and document analysis of 40 marked assignments. Table 1 below shows the distribution of respondents by faculty and gender.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by Faculty and Gender (N=80)

Faculty	Females	Males	Total	%
Applied Social Sciences	9	5	14	18
Arts & Education	6	23	29	36
Commerce & Law	10	14	24	30
Science & Technology	2	11	13	16
Totals	27	53	80	100

All faculties except Applied Social Science depict the prevalent under-representation of female learners even in distance education. Programmes such as the Bachelors of Science in Counselling and Special Education could have shifted the gender balance in favour of females in this faculty. However, the fact that the samples were drawn proportionately ensured that views collected represent the gender set-up of the university.

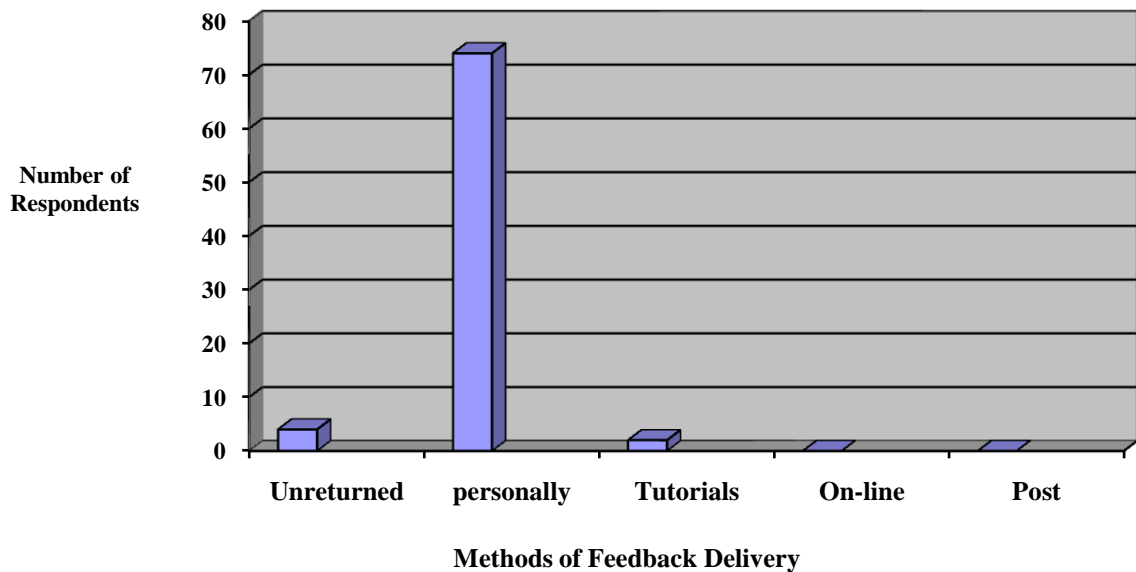
Age was viewed as a significant factor determining learner reaction to feedback comments and therefore the respondents were asked to indicate their age group on five classes given. Table 2 below shows respondents by age group.

Table 2: Respondents by Age Group (N=80)

Age Group	Number of Respondents	%
Under 25 years	2	2
25 – 34	7	9
35 – 44	27	34
45 – 54	35	44
55 and over	9	11
Totals	80	100

It was expected that the majority of respondents would be of a mature age group and 44% were in the range 45 – 54 years. This is characteristic of distance education where most learners are adults. Adult learners have a sensitive ego and can react to comments in assignment responses in very extreme ways depending on the type of comments given. Negative comments can induce a sense of resignation while positive ones can raise learner motivation.

Respondents were asked to indicate the method(s) the university campus used to return marked and commented on assignments to them. The method of handing out feedback was considered important because it concerns both the issues of confidentiality and safety of the documents and the communication done by markers. Five possible methods were suggested and respondents were asked to indicate the one that the university employs to return marked assignments. Figure 1 below shows the responses.



N=80

Figure 1: Bar Graph Showing Methods Used to Return Marked Assignments to Students

The graph shows that the main method of delivering feedback involved learners themselves collecting their work from the centre. Notable was the finding that some respondents (2) said their marked assignments were never returned to them. Another four (4) respondents indicated that they received their marked assignments from their course tutors at tutorial centres. This could be viewed as one method that should be encouraged since those students with difficulty in understanding certain comments would have a chance to interact with the marker. The use of the internet seems to be very low since none of the

respondents received feedback on-line. The researchers were convinced that It is important for distance education institutions to encourage internet use among learners.

Literature provides a wide range of types of comments that help students to achieve more in their learning. In order to determine the most frequently used comments in students' assignments, respondents were asked to indicate the frequency at which the nature of such comments appeared in their assignment responses. Table 3 shows the responses to the question.

Table 3: (%) Frequency of Types of Comments in Marked Assignments (N=80)

Type of Comment	Often	sometimes	Never
Comment that builds my confidence in tackling my work.	24	73	3
Comments that motivated me to improve in my learning.	11	79	10
Comments that correct errors in my work.	86	9	5
Feedback that identifies my strengths and weaknesses.	40	59	1
The comments that invite me for a discussion with my tutor.	4	11	85
The comments that provide me with reference to course material.	14	58	28
The feedback that offers me advice on study techniques and strategies.	8	4	88
The comments that coach me on assignment-writing skills	3	19	78
Comments which explain the grade/mark.	24	31	45
In-text comments next to relevant sections of the assignments itself.	83	11	6.

A more revealing way to visualize the responses in the table above was to group them according to the rating categories. Firstly, there were those responses which strongly suggested that the following types of comments were frequently used by markers in students' assignment responses:

- Comments that correct errors in my work.
- In-text comments next to relevant sections of the assignments itself.

In these two types of comments, about eight in every ten respondents said they received comments that correct errors in their work and also some in-text comments against relevant sections of the assignment. In separate interviews about comments that correct errors, students seemed to prefer comments that guide them towards relevant reading material to being corrected in-text.

The second category includes those comments which most of the respondents said were used by the markers sometimes but not often. In this group were the following comments:

- Comments that motivated me to improve in my learning.
- Feedback that identifies my strengths and weaknesses.
- Comment that builds my confidence in tackling my work.
- The comments that provide me with reference to course material.

It was found encouraging that sometimes markers entered comments that raise students' motivation and confidence to tackle their academic work. Students also sometimes got feedback indicating where their strengths and weaknesses were, and also refer them to sources of information. These types of comments are in line with what Daloz (2005), Brookfield (2003) and Egan (2006) conclude that tutors manage a dialogue with the student that is designed to reinforce success, prompt inquisitive thought and to build the student's confidence when his/her perception of the course subject matter becomes complacent. It was, however, worrisome to discover that the frequency of such essential of feedback was only provided occasionally.

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The last category of comments described by the majority of respondents as never being used by markers includes the following:

- The comments that invite me for a discussion with my tutor.
- The feedback that offers me advice on study techniques and strategies.
- The comments that coach me on assignment-writing skills.

Almost nine out of every ten students who participated in this study said that assignment markers never used comments that invited students for discussion on points of difficulty. Assignment markers were also said never to provide feedback offering advice on study techniques and assignment writing skills. In interviews with some of the respondents, it came out that there were times when the students required face-to-face discussion with markers on areas of difficulty but such opportunities were never created, either because tutors had no time or they did not appreciate the value of such kind of meetings. Cole, Coats and Lentell (2004) discovered that distance learners hoped to have their work treated with respect, to receive an explanation and justification for the grade awarded and to receive a clear explanation of how they could improve and if this does not happen, institutions of distance learning may continue to experience high dropout rates.

In the next section, data is presented which is linked to document analysis. An analysis of forty (40) assignments was done with the objective of identifying comments that appeared unclear, broad in meaning and caustic in nature. Respondents were then asked to indicate their own interpretation of the meanings of each comment, assuming that it was written in their own assignment response. The first part of the question was closed-ended and Table 4 below shows the responses given.

Table 4: Interpretations of Identified Comments from Assignments

Type of comment/feedback	Meaningless and requires marker's explanation No. of respondents	%	Meaningful because marker explained at tutorials No. of Respondents	%
A question mark "?" against a section of an assignment.	77	96	3	4
An underlined section with no written comment	80	100	0	0
A question word or phrase such as WHY?, HOW?, or WHAT?	61	76	19	24
A overall mark with no comment written	47	59	33	41
A description word or phrase such as "Very good" or "Very poor" or "well done" or "Fair".	27	34	53	66

The table shows that some comments or symbols that markers entered into assignment responses totally meant nothing to the students. For example, all respondents were agreed that underlined sections of their assignments without explanations meant completely nothing to them. This implies that no communication took place between student and marker when such type of feedback was provided. Respondents appeared divided in their interpretations of some of the comments. For instance, while 59% of them said an overall mark without any comment given meant nothing to them, 41% indicated that it was meaningful feedback because their marker had explained the meaning to them in a tutorial. What must immediately come to the analyst's mind is the view that a mark tends to mean more to the student than a written comment and therefore where the mark is given, everything else becomes meaningful, including vague comments. This

conclusion is supported by Yorke (2001) who reports that in the absence of marks, it has been discovered that students read feedback much more carefully and use it to guide their learning.

As a follow-up to their responses above, respondents were then asked to comment. The free responses given were transcribed and analyzed and the following themes emerged:

- The use of symbols as communication in assignment must be preceded by explanation of meanings attached if there is to be effective dialogue between learner and marker.
- Some comments border around carelessness and disrespect on the part of the marker towards adult learners. Students expressed feelings of isolation, dejection, less confident in their work, and eventually the thought that it is better to drop out of their programmes.
- Tutorial sessions should devote a part of their time towards communicating types of feedback and their explicit meanings to learners. This will avoid breakdown in communication between marker and student.
- Some few comments from respondents were to the effect that markers must be inducted to deal with adult students that characterize the university.

Apart from the comments that were synthesized into the above themes, there were isolated, but powerful, some emotive statements made and four were randomly selected for inclusion in this report verbatim.

Respondent 1: We pay fees to get help from the university and not to be ridiculed at by some less knowledgeable part-time tutor.

Respondent 2: An assignment is said to be marked when large red pen ticks are smeared all over the pages, not at any particular point that I raised. This is fraudulent!

Respondent 3: I'm annoyed by a marker who makes a cross over a page of my work and says "Revisit the concept or theory"

Respondent 4: Train the tutors to treat us as adults.

These are just a sample of the different students' expectations regarding the nature and tone of communication that should exist between them and their tutors. According to SAIDE (1998), distance learners demand comments that establish and maintain a learning dialogue between them and tutors, and it is critical that feedback in assignment responses facilitates such a dialogue. Assignments, as instructional tools, provide a platform for establishing tutor-learner dialogue that should result in building confidence and enthusiasm to learn.

The final question required respondents to make an overall assessment of marker feedback based on whether they perceive it as beneficial or not to their overall learning. Table 5 below shows the distribution of their ratings across the three scales, which were beneficial, not sure, and not beneficial at all.

Table 5: Respondents' Rating of Whether or not Feedback was Beneficial to Learning (N = 80)

Rating Scale	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
I find feedback to my assignment responses generally beneficial in my studies.	25	31
I am not sure whether I benefit from assignments feedback.	18	23
I find feedback to my assignment responses generally not beneficial at all in my studies.	37	46
Totals	80	100

An interesting aspect that emerged in these results is that 23% of the respondents were either reluctant to commit themselves or were indeed unsure about the effect of feedback to their studies. On hindsight, the tool could have been designed in such a way as to indicate the beneficial-not beneficial dichotomy. However, notwithstanding this outcome, more respondents, about five out of every ten, expressed the opinion that they found assignment comments not beneficial at all. Only 31% said they benefited from feedback in marked assignments. In separate interviews, the majority of interviewees appreciated the benefits of assignment comments to their studies. The discrepancies may be accounted for in those respondents who failed to provide a definite position.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The types of marker comments have been found to be limited in scope compared to what literature and the learners themselves expected in distance education, specifically ZOU. Markers often provide feedback comments that fell short of motivating learners and building a learning dialogue. It appeared that the types of comments less frequently used by assignments markers were the ones students hoped for. This gap between what students expected in terms of comments and what markers provided, tends to create learner fatigue and feelings of academic resignation and failure. It also appeared that very little attention was being given to comments, this possibly arising from certain forms of commenting that was described as difficult to interpret and sometimes rated as downright meaningless by the students.

Learners did not seem to benefit overwhelmingly from assignments feedback. Rather, they suggested several ways of making assignments feedback more meaningful to their studies. The learners appeared to favour comments that direct them to more reading or reference materials, comments that raise weak areas and strong ones in their presentations, feedback that recognize them as adult learners studying at a distance, and also the kind of feedback that create opportunities for face-to-face dialogue with their course tutor. Overall, the students seemed divided in their views pertaining to the effect of feedback on their learning. However, it could be concluded from the evidence collected that comments in assignments responses had a significant contribution towards learning of the students although there were limitations arising perhaps from the type of comments frequently used by markers. Another reason that might be leading to lack of enthusiasm towards comments in marked assignments could be the reported delay in returning marked work.

The study came up with the following recommendations as a result of the conclusions indicated above:

- That the university implements continuous in-house training for markers, particularly part-time tutors, so that they are acquainted with effective ways of commenting in assignment responses.
- That part of tutorials time be devoted to explaining certain types of feedback comments in order to set a level of understanding between markers and learners.
- That marking of assignments and the turn-over period should be kept within the stipulated duration to enable learners to benefit from feedback.
- The university could enhance marker thoroughness through implementing monitoring tools such as requiring the production of tutorial letters from marked course and students' performance summaries.

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