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Exploring the experiences of distance learning students being supported to resubmit a final assignment following a fail result

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ABSTRACT
This study explores the experiences of five distance learners at a UK university who needed support to resubmit their final assignment following a fail result. Having received written feedback on the submission, we asked how this could be best delivered to inform and motivate a successful resubmission. Written feedback alone was found to be insufficient for these students to feel supported. There is a need also for a human connection to provide ‘emotional proximity’ and make sense of the feedback received. In addition to this, students benefit from positive self-talk strategies to come to terms with the difficult emotions resulting from the high stakes of having to resubmit their assignment.

KEYWORDS
Assessment; feedback; distance learning; resubmission

Introduction
There is a wealth of evidence supporting the usefulness of feedback for student learning, with authors contending that it is central to academic development and achievement (Weaver 2006; Carless 2019). This is viewed as being particularly important for distance learning environments, where opportunities for face-to-face interactions between educators and students are limited and there are fewer opportunities for students to ask for immediate clarification of points (Kearns 2012).

For this study, we explored the experiences of five students at The Open University (OU), a UK wide provider of distance education. These students were each supported to resubmit their end of module assignment, having failed the module on first submission. The support consisted of students receiving written feedback on their first submission, access to the student support team and sessions with an identified tutor (associate lecturer). This was part of a wider project (Borgstrom et al. 2021) within the School of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care examining how to improve the feedback provided to students who are eligible to resubmit their final assignment. The larger project was conducted between 2020 and 2021, involving multiple surveys with students and staff, trialling two formats of written feedback provision for students, and the qualitative interviews reported on in this paper.

Examining how best to support students with resubmission of assignments is underexplored in the literature. Carver (2017) analysed the feedback provided to students who were referred
to writing support for a resubmission. In this context, corrective feedforward was found to be effective. Covic and Jones (2008) conducted a study evaluating the use of an essay resubmission option as a means of providing formative assessment. However, this option was offered to all students on a module and differs from this study where the students resubmitting were being offered another chance to pass the course.

**Closing the feedback gap in online distance learning**

Despite its acknowledged importance, a ‘feedback gap’ (Evans 2013, 73) is commonly reported, with students finding feedback unsatisfactory and lecturers stating that students are not acting on it. Most recently, the UK National Student Survey (Office for Students 2022) reports that 69% of students found that they had definitely or mostly received helpful comments on their work. Previous research from Weaver (2006) has revealed that while students recognise the potential value of feedback for their academic progress, some find it too brief, vague, negative, lacking in guidance and not sufficiently aligned to the assessment criteria. Others note ambiguity or misunderstanding of what is meant by oft-used terms such as ‘too much description; not enough analysis’ (Chanock 2000, 98).

Acknowledging that some students struggle to understand assessment feedback, Nash and Winstone (2017) argue it is the educators’ responsibility to provide feedback which is accessible, clear, set in the context of learning outcomes and related to the assessment criteria. Students desire feedback that clearly explains how to improve their performance. Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton (2002) found that many of the students they interviewed would welcome assessment feedback that was balanced in terms of identifying strengths and areas for development. They also reported that students valued feedback that acknowledged errors and commented on the level of argument and critical analysis displayed.

Several of the points made apply to a greater degree to the online distance learning environment. Due to the lack of face-to-face contact, it is particularly important to build rapport with the learner. Uribe and Vaughan (2017) argue that there is a greater chance for misinterpretation and confusion of feedback in this context. Consequently, they recommend providing opportunities for students to interact systematically with formative assessments by submitting multiple drafts. Leibold and Schwarz (2015) make some practical suggestions for best practice: use a positive tone, address the learner by name, provide immediate, specific and balanced feedback. Molloy, Noble, and Ajjawi (2019) argue against the use of the ‘feedback sandwich’ to provide this balance; emphasising instead training for students so that they are able to accept feedback on their work and act constructively on it.

**The issue of student engagement**

The discussion so far has placed the onus more on the educator communicating clearly how well a student has met the learning outcomes or assessment criteria, as well as offering practical suggestions about ways of enhancing performance. This could be aligned to a ‘transmission view’ of feedback (Nicol 2010, 502), describing a linear process of information transmission from the expert to the novice. In contrast, recent literature highlights the role the student plays in the feedback process, with student agency increasingly seen as essential to making the best use of feedback to improve outcomes (Nieminen et al. 2022). There is a recognition here that students need to both actively engage with the feedback provided and take shared responsibility for it to be effective (Winstone et al. 2017).

There are a range of factors that affect how well students engage in this process. Sutton (2012) argues that learners’ use of feedback relates to the distinction between the deep and surface approaches to learning (Marton and Säljö 1976). Students who engage in deep-level processing
will investigate ideas and try and understand what they mean, rather than merely recalling the information as is found with surface-level processing. As a result, learners who are socialised into the deep approach will engage more effectively with more detailed feedback; surface learners less so, taking a more strategic approach. Sutton (2012, 33) states that to gain academic literacy learners must acquire ‘new ways of knowing, being and acting in academic contexts’.

Despite the enduring appeal of this deep/surface distinction, some researchers argue that the model developed traction before its theoretical underpinnings could be adequately expounded (Howie and Bagnall 2013). Nonetheless, a role remains for enhancing students’ understanding of feedback by providing an opportunity for engaging in a dialogue and clarifying advice provided so that students can identify strategies to enhance their performance and achievement.

As well as emphasising these cognitive aspects, Molloy, Noble, and Ajjawi (2019, 89) assert that feedback is an ‘emotional business’. This is arguably even more the case for the resubmission of an assignment, which Carver (2017) describes as ‘high stakes’ with a perceived threat of failure. For example, students may face financial implications if they need to retake the module. Even if the resubmission is passed, there is a possible lowering of the final degree classification due to a capped result.

**Background to study**

The UK-based Open University is a distance learning institution that offers qualifications based on a modular structure with each module having an end of module assessment (EMA). Within Health and Social Care, EMAs are either an academic essay or a two-part written paper (e.g. essay and reflective piece). It is a summative assignment with minimal feedback given besides a mark.

Within most modules, the EMA is double-marked by a team of associate lecturers on the module and, on occasion, other members of the academic team. Students who score between 30-39% on the module are offered a resubmission opportunity. This is decided by a panel made up of senior academics including the module chair and meets after the first and second marking is complete. For students in this position on the modules considered here, feedback is offered for formative purposes in the form of a letter – referred to in this study as the feedback letter. In the summer of 2021, approximately 230 letters were sent to students across seven modules (typically less than 10% of students studying in any one year) via a trial methodology: students either received feedback in the form of concise bullet-points or a more detailed grid aligned to all marking criteria. The rationale for this trial was to see which form of feedback was more effective for students resubmitting their EMA.

Students resubmitting their assignment can access further support from an associate lecturer commonly referred to as the tutor. This tutor is usually the same member of staff who supported the student during their study of the module but may not have been involved in marking the original assignment. Students can also get support from advisors who work in the university Student Support Team.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants were a self-selected sample drawn from a larger group of students who had responded to a survey as part of the wider project. For this survey, the students had been asked a range of questions about the feedback letter and support they had received such as whether it was useful, motivating and timely. All the students surveyed had studied a module
within Health and Social Care as distance learning students at the Open University, and each had been offered a resubmission due to receiving a ‘fail–entitled to resubmit’ result for the module.

The survey respondents could opt in to have a follow-up interview. The data discussed here is from the interviews with these participants. A total of 178 students were eligible for the survey; 29 students responded (16.3%) and of those, 5 students (2.8%) opted for an interview (three male, two female). The gender split did not reflect closely the gender mix for the survey participants (79% were female) nor the student population taking Health and Social Care modules (approximately 90% are female).

**Ethical considerations**

A potential for harm to this group of students was identified by the team, as discussing ‘failure’ is emotionally charged. A preliminary ethics approval was submitted to the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The committee determined that the project was evaluation work and did not require further HREC approval. The project was also reviewed by the Student Research Project Panel’s working group (SRPP), who ensure projects are fit for purpose and do not burden students; their approval was successfully gained.

Prior to the interview, students were asked to provide consent for their answers to be transcribed and anonymised. It was explained that responses would be used to inform the project and could appear in publications. This consent was verbally recorded. Students were informed they could opt out at any time/withdraw their data. Students were able to access a transcript of their interview.

The students interviewed were not students of the interviewer and had not met the tutor previously. However, they were made aware that the interviewer was an associate lecturer. The interviewer was sensitive to the possibility that students may have felt the need to provide more favourable answers when commenting on the performance of an academic colleague of the interviewer, despite these colleagues not being identified. An attempt was made to counteract this by explaining that responses would be fully confidential, answers would not affect their academic progress and that we wanted candid responses.

**Procedure**

Interviews were conducted online by the associate lecturer member of the research team (VM). The online format was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, the interviews took place when the university-wide policy was to avoid face-to-face contact to limit the spread of Covid-19. Secondly, being a UK-wide university the possible benefit of face-to-face interaction must be balanced against the large distances involved, making this a potentially less attractive and accessible option.

The interviews were semi-structured, lasting between 20 and 40 minutes. This design was chosen to enable participants to elaborate on their own experiences and for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions, whilst ensuring that the discussion was sufficiently focussed on the aims of the study (Elliot et al. 2016). The question schedule was agreed by the research team with the overall aim being to capture students’ experiences of the feedback and the support received with the resubmission. More specifically, we wanted to know what was helpful or motivating about the feedback letter. To reduce potential bias, it was not known to the interviewer prior to the discussion which letter format the student had received in the trial.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim using the auto-transcribe feature in MS Teams, checked for accuracy and then anonymised. Thematic analysis was led by author VM, working with co-authors to ensure clarity and validity. This was a general inductive analysis described by Thomas (2006, p238) as using ‘detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher’. Following this approach, an initial read through of the transcripts was carried out to identify overall
themes. These themes were then developed and refined through memo writing and discussion with co-authors to ensure that these met with the research objectives. The themes were divided into the following categories – student views about the feedback letter, tutor support, students’ emotions, OU systems and feedback in general. It was agreed by the team that this captured all the themes and that no future categories were required.

**Results**

**Students’ views about the feedback letter**

A central objective was to determine how students perceived and used the feedback letter and, as such, a considerable portion of the interview was dedicated to understanding this and asking follow-up questions based on what students said. The main ways students talked about the letter can be described as material (terminology, content, format), procedural (receiving and using the letter), and affectual (tone, emotion and reaction). These are not discrete descriptors; indeed, students made links between items such as format, method of delivery and tone.

The students were asked specifically to discuss the content of the letter; this covered the material aspects. Terminology – the words used within the feedback – was something one student commented directly upon. For example, Interviewee A noted:

> the terminology was a wee bit more difficult to read, at first. I had to read it a couple times to grasp what they were saying.

Interviewee A clarified that the letter contained the correct content, but could have been written more in ‘layman’s terms’ to facilitate their understanding of what was required of them. Other students said that they understood what the letter was saying; however, they sometimes wanted clearer actionable feedback.

This links to the students’ notions about the overall content and format of the letter, which covered comments about structure, balance and how comprehensive the letter was. There were mixed views about the content. Some students indicated that the letter provided a comprehensive balance; others felt more could have been included about what they got right (Interviewee B). Students commented on the need for factual communication with actionable points.

Overall, there was no clear indication that one format of feedback being trialled (grid versus bullet point) was preferred or more useful from the students’ perspectives. An exception to this was for Interviewee E who felt that the three bullet points needed more clarification and did not seem to warrant a fail mark. Interviewee C noted that they liked the grid format and found they could understand it. Multiple students towards the end of their interviews, however, reflected that what they preferred may not be universal across the student group. Students were also asked about the format of the letter, and generally written communication of some form (first by email as this is quicker) was preferred, although some noted that audio could provide a more personal feel, concurring with previous research findings (Lunt and Curran 2010). There was also a wish expressed for proactive contact. Therefore, it is important not only to be concerned with the material nature of the feedback but also the *procedural* aspects that enable students to receive, understand and make use of the feedback.

We specially asked if they found the letter motivating and who they thought should write it. The answers to these questions help us understand how students emotionally respond to feedback and what kind of relationship they seek to have with those who provide the feedback; this illuminated the affectual aspects. One student remarked very strongly that the feedback letter provided a ‘second chance’ (Interviewee D), and as such was quite motivating. Students
reported different assessments of the tone of the letters from neutral to formal to friendly. Tone can be very important for students. Interviewee C found it cold and demotivating given the formal, written format of the communication. Interviewee B stated:

From this letter, I didn't receive encouragement. It was just like a statement saying that was wrong.

On the other hand, Interviewee D noted that the situation can be demotivating (because of failing) but that the tone of the letter was nice and reassuring. Interviewee A highlighted that positive feedback and some direction was given in the feedback letter:

it tells you… where you went wrong area-wise and what you've done well and so it's balanced…. What you've done well, what you still needed to kinda do so that's fine. It was fair.

Some wished that the author of the feedback would be the EMA marker, and particularly that they could enter into dialogue to clarify points (Interviewee B). This echoes other findings within distance education literature about students seeking out opportunities for clarification to avoid misinterpretation (Uribe and Vaughan 2017). Another noted that ‘if it’s coming from the module chair, it means like the person is in that kind of position of authority’ (Interviewee B). However, this reflects more of a transmission view of feedback.

**Students’ views about tutor support**

In addition to the feedback letter, interviews discussed additional opt-in tutor support the students received; all interviewees received such support. Students opt-in via general university procedures. The support can have both personal and practical elements. On the personal side, interviewees stated that the relationship with the tutor provided reassurance and motivation to resubmit. On the practical side, tutors helped to make sense of the feedback letter, mainly by providing clarification of its contents. The support provided by tutors appeared to be student-led, but interviewees also expressed the view that tutors’ time is quite limited.

Several interviewees expressed the importance of talking to someone about their resubmission, rather than just receiving a letter. Interviewee C stated:

You want to talk to someone. For me, I think that’s the missing link!

It is in this context that Interviewee B pointed to the importance of ‘emotional proximity’ in the process of receiving feedback, a helpful phrase which suggests the need for a more personal touch. Receiving a ‘fail – entitled to resubmit’ result can be an emotional experience and understandably students expressed the need for further support and motivation. For Interviewee A, there was a need for encouragement as well as reassurance that they were ‘on the right track’ and that it was not a ‘total failure’. All students were positive about the support received from their tutor with Interviewee B stating that:

I felt looked after…. he was always there for me.

On the practical side, tutors played a large part in supporting students to make sense of the letter. An example of this is provided by Interviewee A who stated:

I had an idea [what the letter was saying]. So I then checked with my tutor and they kind of have clarified that’s what it is - what it was actually saying.

The interviewees remarked that the tutor provided additional clarity, emphasising the importance of speaking directly to the tutor.

There was also a recognition by tutors that students are independent learners and this needs to be facilitated. For example, Interviewee C stated:
And it wasn’t a question of them telling you what you needed to do… They facilitate because you’re at that level of learning.

Interviewee A concurred, stating how the tutor asked for the student’s own interpretation of what the letter means. Similarly, Interviewee D remarked that the mistakes should be identified by the student first, using the letter, before going on to seek support from the tutor. Yet, Interviewee C stated that tutors should prompt students not to miss important deadlines, suggesting a less student-led approach in some circumstances. This suggests the need for tutors to find a balance between facilitation and providing direction where needed. This reflects the tension described in the literature, as students are likely to vary in whether they are willing or able to be take full responsibility as agents in their learning journey.

Interviewee B also stated a need for more direction:

I know it needs to be done in a limit because this is level three, but still it should be feedback to students [stating] exactly what they need to focus on… giving me the details of what I need to improve.

The idea of there being a limit to what tutors do also extended to understanding the limits to the time that tutors can offer. Interviewee A stated that ‘the tutor’s time is very, very restricted’ and expressed a wish for more time to be available. Similarly, Interviewee C stated that:

How often can I ring up? Am I going to be annoying if I ring and or email… I’ve a feeling that they’re always busy and sometimes “Not you again!”, just that feeling I didn’t want to hassle them too much.

This may suggest that tutors need to outline more clearly what the students can expect and set boundaries around this. This way, students are less likely to feel they have encroached beyond what a tutor is able to provide.

Students’ emotions and use of positive self-talk

As might be expected, the interviewees used some emotive language to describe their experience of receiving a ‘fail – entitled to resubmit’ result.

I felt hopeless. (Interviewee B)

I felt really quite low. I was quite gutted… Just feel a wee bit “Argh!” (Interviewee A)

I feel like, “Oh god, what have I done?” (Interviewee D)

As well as describing emotions, closer examination of the text revealed some instances where the interviewees describe their experience by quoting what they thought or said; either to themselves or to others. It could be surmised that this allows the student to manage emotions by seeing the situation from a more objective perspective. For example, after initially feeling upset about the result, Interviewee B addressed themselves with what might be interpreted to be positive self-talk:

you need to cool your emotion down and have a sit down and read again and say, “Oh yeah, it’s not right. It’s not meeting [the] academic standard so we have to repeat it”.

Similarly, after support from their tutor, Interviewee C uses a quote of their own thoughts for motivation:

I thought “Yeah, I’ve got it! I understand it”.

Interviewee B states how the tutor provided positive affirmations to provide reassurance and increase self-belief, encapsulating this with the phrase ‘Come on let’s crack on - we’re gonna make it and you’re gonna make it!’ Importantly, Interviewee B also reflects on how other students might feel differently to themselves:
We need to take into account the person who’s reading a letter who failed exam might be feeling like more low because [of] reading something like I read.

Overall, it appears that students appear aware of the emotional nature of the process, both for themselves and others as well as the importance of responding positively to this. It was discussed earlier how Molloy, Noble, and Ajjawi (2019) had cast some doubt on the effectiveness of the feedback sandwich model, instead stating that students need training to respond constructively to feedback. The findings here would suggest that harnessing positivity is an essential part of this process, to help students to draw on their inner resources and have a proactive approach to making the necessary changes.

**Students’ views about the system for delivering feedback and support**

Discussing their experience of how feedback was delivered through OU systems, several interviewees wanted proactive contact from the university about their result, soon (or even before) results were released. They wanted information beyond outlining the procedures for resubmission. They wanted to hear from their tutor who could help them understand how to make changes to their work. It is recognised that OU students can feel isolated (Mittelmeier, Cross, and Whitelock 2017) and that receiving only written notification and feedback can add to this, especially at a time when students may need extra support to make sense of their next steps.

Students also highlighted that they had to send their copies of the feedback letters and the submitted assignment to tutors ahead of individual support sessions because tutors do not have access to these. When feedback is not available in the tutor support session, this caused challenges:

then I went to look for it when I was speaking to my tutor and I couldn't find it for the life of me! But I got there. (Interviewee A)

He [the tutor] asked me about my submitted assignment because he says he doesn't have access to this anymore and he asked me about if I received any feedback. (Interviewee B)

Interviewee A described the process of locating the information as ‘disjointed’ leaving them ‘scrambling in the dark’ at a time when they needed to access the feedback again. To resolve this, the student suggested that the feedback should be available right up until the deadline of the EMA. Similarly, Interviewee B suggested that students who have a ‘fail – entitled to resubmit’ result should receive feedback earlier to allow more time to prepare their resubmission. Interviewee A was also of the opinion that the feedback being unavailable after a certain amount of time was a deliberate policy to reduce procrastination.

Students were aware of workloads and limits on resources. However, the point was made that the student is a consumer of services:

actually I am paying for the service here... It includes the tuition for your tutor but it also includes the service in terms of if you are stuck or need help or something. (Interviewee E)

The responses here highlight the possibility that staff in different roles - student support, tutors, module chairs - might relate to students differently. For example, it may be less likely that tutors view students as consumers paying for a service than someone who has a more direct involvement with the arrangement of student funding.

**Feedback given in the context of Open University study**

In addition to specific thoughts about the feedback letter, students shared their thoughts about feedback more generally in the context of their OU studies. There was some recognition of how feedback can be given in different ways in a variety of learning environments:
when you’re in a class with people and interaction, it’s a different kinda feedback and different engagement that you get. I do go onto the tutor forum groups [online] and do all the kinda things I'm asked but sometimes it is still a wee bit separated. (Interviewee A)

This suggests a preference to have synchronous feedback in a classroom environment, rather than the asynchronous feedback offered by online forums. This could be linked to the ongoing theme highlighted that students prefer to have immediate dialogue, rather than solely rely on unidirectional written feedback.

**Limitations**

The students are from one school in a UK distance learning institution; the findings may not apply fully to other settings. The data collected was from a small, unrepresentative sample of students. They all opted to have resubmission support from tutors, which is not something every student does; this may make these students less representative. Furthermore, these students were self-selecting which suggests they may have had reason to take part in the interview.

The interviews were carried out by an associate lecturer (tutor). This involvement may mean the participants were more likely to give a positive assessment of the tutor input than if interviewed by another member of the research team, such as the student representative.

**Discussion**

**Like a ‘second chance’ - what students valued in relation to being supported with resubmission**

For this project, we are interested in what students found helpful and motivating after receiving a ‘fail – entitled to resubmit’ result. The scope of the discussion is about both doing well in the resubmission and being supported to attempt it. Several key points can be drawn from these interviews. Firstly, students expressed mixed views about the feedback letters: how easy they were to understand, their tone, usefulness and how motivating they were. There was also a need for the feedback to be made understandable and contain clear guidance for improvement, as well as resolving practical issues so that the result and feedback can be located promptly online.

Students valued the offer of a resubmission, like a ‘second chance’, and overwhelmingly found the tutor support sessions helpful. Tutors were reported to be encouraging, motivating and reassuring, supporting students to make sense of written feedback and provide a sense of accountability. One student described this as building ‘emotional proximity’ which is harder to achieve with a feedback letter alone.

**The need for ‘emotional proximity’ and synchronicity in feedback and support**

This notion of emotional proximity concurs with previous work from Molloy, Noble, and Ajjawi (2019), who point out that there is more to feedback than just the information given. It also resonates with work from Rowe (2011) which see feedback as having an emotional function. There is a need to recognise the emotions feedback brings up for students and engage with these. Negative emotional effects from feedback can be long term, especially if it involves personal comments about the work presented. Accordingly, Molloy, Noble, and Ajjawi (2019, 86) suggest that feedback is timed appropriately and techniques employed for ‘softening the blow’ of negative content.

Tutors and other support staff can be seen to act as a guide to navigating this emotionally difficult path. Tutors may well have built a relationship with the student prior to offering this support, and it is reasonable to infer that this familiarity would also increase the effectiveness
of it. The importance of the student-tutor relationship is emphasised by Ajjawi and Boud (2018), who demonstrate that dialogue within this relationship is an essential part of feedback. Generally, there appears to be a preference for connected and synchronous feedback rather than asynchronous unidirectional communication. Students want to be able to talk to someone to clarify issues. Angelov and Ganobcsik-Williams (2015, 54) found that asynchronous feedback can be done in a dialogic way avoiding a ‘prescriptive one-sided monologue’. However, this approach may be easier to achieve when marking continuous assessment. Being an end-of-module assessment, the feedback is given in a letter from the module chair so the student is not in a dialogue with the person who provided it. This may be appropriate when the end-of-module assignment is summative and final. However, providing formative feedback on resubmissions can be seen as muddying the waters of the usual distinction between formative and summative assessment (Covic and Jones 2008).

**Personalised support and its limits**

As well as support from tutors, students expressed the need for a similar level of reciprocity from support staff at the university. Interviewee E expressed that they needed to be respected as they are a consumer. This would frame the relationship as a less emotional one by emphasising the financial transaction.

Although there is a preference stated for one-to-one feedback, there was also an awareness that staff, particularly tutors, needed to have their time protected by not being overly burdened. There may be contextual factors here specific to The Open University where tutors (associate lecturers) tend to be more readily available than might be expected at other universities due to the emphasis placed on providing individual support for distance learners. Nonetheless, in contrast to this, the interviewees saw being an independent learner as an important part of their student identity, which the tutors promoted. There must be a balance between providing enough advice and guidance to provide support without jeopardising this valued independence.

**Student agency and the use of self-talk**

Students themselves employed strategies such as positive self-talk to help them soften the blow and increase motivation for resubmission. This was an important strategy to get in touch with an inner sense of motivation – strengthening their belief that they can meet their overall study goal. The use of inner speech by students for self-motivation and reflection has been recognised by Morin, Duhnych, and Racy (2018). There is also a substantial attention paid to this concept in the sports psychology literature, where self-talk has been shown to be effective in improving performance (Hatzigeorgiadis et al. 2014)

The concept of self-talk aligns with the notion of student agency being an essential part of improving outcomes. However, for this agency to be effective it needs to reach beyond the concept of the individual (Nieminen et al. 2022). There are wider factors to consider in terms of how the learner relates to their own situation, and the support they need. As such, positive self-talk alone may not be possible or sufficient for all students. There is still a role here for supporters to amplify and give credence to positive affirmations to provide the conditions for this agency to flourish.

**The effect of university processes**

Due to the way The Open University’s processes function, the tutor supporting the student is not the same person who provided the feedback. Tutors therefore need to draw on their own expertise to make sense of academic feedback provided by someone else. However, the success
of this process relies to some extent on the assumption that feedback is objective, or at least, the tutor needs to broadly agree with it.

There are other aspects over which the supporters of the student have limited control, including the timing and access to feedback. Students therefore need supporters (tutors/other support staff) who are prepared to advocate for their needs to those in the organisation who have more direct influence over such processes. At times, this may place members of staff outside of their usual role, such as tutors chasing up more administrative aspects on behalf of the student.

**Navigating the path as a distance learner**

The students interviewed appeared to have a good level of awareness of individual learning preferences and how this translates into their experience as distance learners. Interviewee A referred to the experience of being ‘separated’ from other students in the online learning environment. A link could be made here to points on emotional proximity. It seems that the need to connect with others in a synchronous way is important for some students. Students who attend a university course in person (rather than online) will have these opportunities by the nature of the learning environment. For distance learning, it is reasonable to assume that more effort must be made to provide these opportunities.

The results offer information on how students navigate the emotionally difficult path from receiving a fail result to resubmission. The feedback was given with the intention of providing formative guidance. However, the asynchronous nature of the written feedback on the end-of-module assessment means that is not sufficient. There is a need, therefore, for tutor support to make sense of the feedback through discussion.

**Conclusion**

Effective feedback on assignments is essential for student learning, particularly in distance learning environments where there may be fewer opportunities for feedback to be given in a synchronous or face-to-face way. The interviews conducted here support previous work by affirming that feedback provided to students needs to be understandable and written in a useful and motivating way. The processes surrounding feedback are important: students expressed a need to access information easily, including the ability to store and retrieve digital feedback.

In line with previous literature, it was revealed that students perceive themselves as independent learners, sharing responsibility for their progress with others who provide the necessary support, advocacy and expertise to enable progression. Furthermore, awareness was shown that other students may have differing perceptions of what is helpful and that there are limits placed around what the institution or individual supporters can reasonably provide.

The central finding of this study is that there is a need for a human connection providing emotional proximity between students and those supporting them. Students benefit from positive self-talk to reconcile difficult emotions resulting from having to resubmit their assignment. When providing support for the resubmission of an end-of-module assignment more is at stake, making the emotional dimensions of this feedback even more pertinent. This need to prioritise human connection provides a helpful insight for future education practice, and warrants further research.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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