Inclusive practice in higher education: Feedback that breaks pedagogical barriers

Ms. Anna D. Rowe, Ms. Michelle Muchatuta and Associate Professor Leigh N. Wood, Macquarie University

Introduction

Feedback provided to students on completion of an assessment task has been identified as an important source of information about teacher, course and university expectations (Pearce, 2007). It can be used to promote ongoing development and acknowledge performance in many different contexts, thus forming a crucial support mechanism in the learning and teaching process. Despite its significance, little research from the students’ point of view has been generated and feedback has largely been omitted from inclusive practice educational texts. The focus of this chapter will be inclusive feedback practices, within the context of a learning environment characterised by a high proportion of international and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students (approximately 57% and 75% respectively).¹ Our research demonstrates that effective feedback is highly sought after by students but an underused engagement resource by academics. We propose that feedback can be a vehicle for the creation of a collaborative, inclusive and constructive learning environment that benefits all students.

In 2005 Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis reported less than one-third of university students studying in Australia perceived that teaching staff took an interest in their progress and gave helpful feedback. This was a significant drop from previous findings in 1994 which showed 45% of students felt that teaching staff were interested in the quality of their learning experience (cited in Krause et al., 2005). This does not necessarily imply that students are overly critical and/or that teaching staff are providing a poor level of service. Rather, it may be highlighting a mismatch between academic and student perceptions.

Inclusive educational practices aim to replace traditional notions of educational excellence (Nunan, George, & McCausland, 2000). Talbot defines an inclusive curriculum as: ‘[o]ne in which all staff and students feel valued, irrespective of age, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, religious or personal beliefs, background or personal circumstances’ (2004, p. 9). The underlying principle of an inclusive curriculum is that all students can succeed under the right conditions. As Reid (2002) notes, in order to develop an inclusive curriculum, universities need to take into account student perspectives. Students have broad notions of what constitutes ‘good teaching’, and their views often differ from the prescriptive views of good teaching practice held by teachers and educational researchers, and in some instances provide an opposing view (Drew, 2001; Reid & Johnston, 1999). Within each group differences are also evident in university educators’ ideas about teaching. For example, in a recent study about notions of diversity, Gordon, Reid and Petocz (2010) found some educators perceived it as irrelevant to the context of teaching, others addressed it through a deficit model and some actively utilised diversity as an essential resource in their teaching.

This chapter examines the use of feedback processes as an inclusive, quality teaching tool and contributes to recent research which has identified a need for developing pedagogies for widening participation and student diversity (Gale, 2009; Hockings, 2010). Increasing diversification of the student body within Higher Education, due to internationalisation (Harman, 2004) and broadening participation policies nationally and internationally (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; David et al., 2008; Gale, 2009; Hockings, Cooke, & Bowl, 2007) has created challenges for university teachers. Decreases in the perceived quality of teaching as reported by Krause et al. (2005) are concurrent with increasing international student numbers (Li, 2004). This could partly be due to problems that arise when teachers are confronted with what they perceive to be academic differences between international and local students. Identification of observed differences can become deviations from the norm – as problems to be resolved – or ‘deficits’ in need of correction (Egege & Kutieleh, 2004). The focus on demographical variables as a basis to assist teachers to adapt to this diverse learning environment often results in a deficit view of ‘non-traditional’ students (Hockings, 2010). For example, a number of educational theorists and researchers believe international students – particularly Chinese learners – are predominately surface learners who prefer rote learning, lack critical skills, are passive in class and focus on assessment (for a review of these issues refer to Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Samuelowicz, 1987). Such views have recently been challenged with a growing consensus that generalisations and simplifications can lead to misconceptions and cultural stereotypes (Baskerville-Morley, 2005). Such challenges extend to academic and student perceptions of the provision of feedback. For example, the perception that students – particularly international students – are only interested in receiving grades as opposed to detailed feedback (Brinkworth, McCann, Mathews, & Nordström, 2009; Lilly, Richter, & Rivera-Macias, 2010) has been challenged by studies which have found that university students do value and use feedback (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002; Rowe & Wood, 2008a, 2008b; Rowe, Wood, & Petocz, 2008; Weaver, 2006). Our research suggests that demographic variables play a minimal role in predicting student perceptions and preferences for feedback (Rowe & Wood, 2008a), and strategies for improving feedback should not necessarily be based on the assumed needs and preferences of different student groups.

An alternative view would be one where barriers to learning can be prevented and participation for all is possible (Booth, Nes, & Stromstad, 2003; Gale, 2009). Within such a framework, ‘diversity is assumed, welcomed and viewed as a rich resource rather than seen as a problem’ (Booth et al., 2003, p. 2), and an attempt is made to teach students from within their own cultural parameters. With the Bradley Report’s emphasis on improving accessibility for all Australians, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and regional areas, these challenges are only going to intensify (Bradley et al., 2008).

What do students say about feedback?

In keeping with the current focus on student centred learning, we investigated university student feedback preferences. Almost 1,000 students from two universities were surveyed using a questionnaire developed by the authors – the Student Feedback Questionnaire (SFQ), published in Rowe and Wood (2008a). Survey items were based on themes from the literature and a thematic analysis of data from earlier focus groups and individual interviews (Rowe & Wood, 2008b). Students were surveyed on a range of aspects relating to feedback, including the type and timeliness of feedback provided and the extent to which they valued feedback. Half the participants surveyed were local students (52%); only 36% of all students indicated
that English was their first language. The majority of international students were from China (45%), Hong Kong (14.8%) and Malaysia (5.6%). This sample was representative of demographics within the faculties of the two institutions.

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS, and as anticipated results showed a range of preferences for feedback (Rowe & Wood, 2008a; Rowe et al., 2008). Two findings are worth noting. The first was that demographic variables emerged as poor predictors of students’ preferences for feedback, with the exception of gender (Rowe & Wood, 2008a). The extent to which students valued feedback and the way they perceived it was found to be a better predictor of preferences for types of feedback (Rowe & Wood, 2008a). This supports research suggesting that student approaches to studying and perceptions of teaching directly influence the quality of student learning (Entwistle, McCune, & Hounsell, 2002). It was concluded that the provision of diverse range of feedback types should work successfully across all demographic groups.

The second finding revealed feedback was an important opportunity to communicate with lecturers and tutors individually (Rowe, in press). Our data suggests that a perceived lack of care, interest or respect for students by teaching staff is a major contributing factor to the reported dissatisfaction with feedback. Students are looking to feedback as a means of satisfying a need for personal contact and emotional support, and are frustrated because the feedback they are receiving is not catering to this need (Rowe, in press). Many recommendations made by students directly related to behaviour of teaching staff; they requested tutors to be more available, responsive and engaging. Students cited lengthy turn-around and response times to student queries, and poor quality or ineffective responses to requests for assistance as examples of non-caring teacher behaviour.

This highlights a relational and/or emotional need for feedback previously overlooked in educational research and practice, although recent studies are reporting similar findings (Perera, Lee, Win, Perera, & Wijesuriya, 2008; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010). We propose that students’ apparent need for more frequent communication and personal contact with academic staff is not due to their service level expectations, but rather to meet emotional and social needs necessary for learning to take place (Biesta, 2004; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Crossman, 2007; Drew, 2001; Poulos & Mahony, 2008; Rowe, in press). One might conclude that feedback is an effective way of breaking down socio-cultural barriers that influence learning outcomes. By emphasising the importance of feedback as an opportunity for a more interactive relationship with the teacher, the students appear to be calling for a more active and participatory form of learning – to be engaged in the learning process as individuals, rather than being merely a member of a group (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Rowe, in press).

Why are students’ expectations not being met?

The causes of unmet student expectations were not the focus of our study. International students were found to be less satisfied than local students with feedback they were receiving (Rowe & Wood, 2008a), and the high proportion of overseas students in the Faculty may indicate a failure to meet the broad learning needs of all its students. The perception that learners should be required to fit into a mono-cultural education system with a fixed curriculum irrespective of their background may underpin current practice. While teachers are increasingly distancing themselves from deficit views of ‘non-traditional’ students, evidence suggests that assimilationist and deficit approaches to teaching are still present.
Surprisingly, research into academic staff perceptions of feedback is sparse, and there are even fewer studies which compare teachers’ views with those of students. Available research suggests that there may be a mismatch in conceptualisations and expectations relating to feedback, which could be contributing to the dissatisfaction reported by students in our study and others (Brinkworth et al., 2009; Krause et al., 2005; Maclellan, 2001). Research shows similarities between students and teachers in their recognition of the value and the importance of feedback, as well as its role in improving learning and what constitutes good assessment feedback (Lilly et al., 2010). Other findings point to differences (Brinkworth et al., 2009; Maclellan, 2001). Students do not always recognise feedback when they receive it and/or teachers may believe they are providing sufficient feedback when students’ perceptions differ (Brinkworth et al., 2009). Students hold broad conceptualisations of feedback (Poulos & Mahony, 2008; Rowe, in press), particularly in the latter stages of their degrees (Pokorny & Pickford, 2010). First year students, for example, have been found to hold a narrower view of feedback (i.e. as written comments on assignments) and may not recognise it when provided in other forms. Other studies (Maclellan, 2001) report that academics are also confused and this may be contributing to students’ underdeveloped conception of what assessment is.

Perceptions of the role played by feedback in prompting discussion between staff and student(s) and in enabling students to understand assessment have also been found to differ between students and teachers (Maclellan, 2001). Discrepancies between students’ and teachers’ perceptions of the use of feedback have been reported with teachers’ conceptions about the role and utility of feedback often being at odds with their knowledge of (or assumptions about) what students do with it (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Maclellan, 2001). Teachers report students do not use feedback optimally and that they are only interested in the grade (Lilly et al., 2010; Maclellan, 2001). On the other hand students feel that they do respond to feedback appropriately (Maclellan, 2001). Maclellan (2001) proposes that the differing perceptions of assessment held by academics and students are contributing to assessment practices which run contrary to formative learning and consequently restrict students’ views of the utility of feedback.

Teachers do believe in the benefits and value of feedback. However, there are a number of constraints which affect their ability to provide the desired level and quality (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Maclellan, 2001). As Brinkworth et al. (2009) note, it is not surprising to see a discrepancy between feedback wanted, feedback given and turnaround times. This is exacerbated by the fact that university teachers face increasing workloads due in part to growing student numbers. In addition, the strong emphasis on research outputs and the little weight given to teaching performance puts pressure on academics to focus on research, restricting the time for teaching beyond the compliance requirements of assessment policies (Bailey & Garner, 2010). The improvement of assessment practice is not a priority for some academics (Lilly et al., 2010). Students in our study were clearly aware of resource constraints and the limited time teachers had for marking and providing feedback (Rowe & Wood, 2008a), a finding replicated in other studies (Holmes & Papageorgiou, 2009; Weaver, 2006). Clearly there is a need for further research in this area.
Breaking barriers through assessment feedback

Feedback has two faces: a ‘traditional face’ and an ‘inclusive face’. Traditional models of teaching view feedback as information transmitted from teacher to student, a process of one-way communication, where students play a reactive role in constructing and using feedback (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Traditional approaches to feedback can potentially marginalise and alienate students by limiting their abilities to become self-regulated learners and develop relationships with their teachers. This in turn is likely to have a detrimental effect on their perceptions of learning and ultimately their overall performance. More recently feedback is being viewed as a collaborative process, providing students and academics with an opportunity to participate in the learning and teaching process, thus allowing students to take an active role in their own learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Price, Carroll, O'Donovan, & Rust, 2010; Rowe, in press). Inclusive feedback offers staff and students an opportunity to debrief and to reflect on their experience, taking into account the personal needs of learners by recognising the social context of learning.

Feedback can be used as a constructive learning tool to clarify instructional expectations and processes, provide educational interventions, administer praise and communicate a level of care and interest in students’ wellbeing and academic progress. Formative assessment provides an opportunity for teachers to offer students feedback on their progress throughout the semester, often after ‘performance’ on a learning task. Examples include diagnostic assessments, informal feedback within the classroom, online and individual consultations. While formative assessment can be used for grading purposes, its main role is to inform both teachers and students about the progress of student learning so that adjustments can be made. Summative assessment, by contrast, forms part of the grading process and is usually carried out at the end of a course (i.e. final examinations). We focus on formative assessment, vital not only for the reasons outlined above, but also because of its role in ‘academic integration’ and consequent effect on student retention (Tinto, 2000). Resource constraints have led to a reduction in the frequency of assignments, in the quantity and quality of feedback and in timeliness of feedback provided (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004/05). It has also been suggested that individual feedback to students in class has declined with increase in class sizes, although supporting evidence is sketchy (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004/05). It is our view that within the scope of these limitations, teachers could enhance effective teaching practice and benefit by employing a variety of feedback types, not only to account for different learning approaches but also to cater for the diverse communication orientations and abilities of the student cohort and their psychosocial-relational needs.

Inclusive assessment has been linked to increases in student satisfaction, improvements in student marks and grades and the provision of increased opportunities for discussion (Waterfield & West, 2009). Moreover, while the development of inclusive pedagogical methods may seem time consuming at first, inclusive assessment does reduce the need for individually modified exam processes later, and reduces students’ reliance on extra educational support systems (Pilner & Johnson, 2004). This is particularly important for teachers of large class sizes. It also reduces the need for students to separately identify themselves as having a disability and/or learning difficulties – a process which may contribute to anxiety because of fears relating to discrimination and rejection (ADCET, 2009).
Type/Mode of feedback

No single assessment method can effectively support or challenge all students and the provision of diverse types of feedback is crucial to effective learning. A student’s learning orientation will play a role in determining their preferences for feedback styles and modes (Rowe & Wood, 2008b). When feedback is closely aligned with course learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment, it provides students with clear and consistent expectations regarding how to succeed (Tinto, 2003). The use of inclusive pedagogical practices benefit all students, not just students identified as having ‘special needs,’ and as such should be viewed as good practice.

Formative feedback can be designed to equitably assess the learning outcomes of diverse students in order to increase opportunities for success amongst all students. Planning the curriculum in an inclusive manner ahead of semester, rather than making accommodations for students who later identify as requiring adjustments to their assessment, ensures the academic integrity of a course is preserved. For example, provision of a variety of assessment and feedback types avoids situations where teachers have to make up alternative assessments on short notice, which may arguably be of a lower difficulty level. We propose that the provision of a diverse range of feedback types will assist in combating students’ perceived isolation and invisibility, and encourage the continued participation of all students in the higher education sector.

Flexibility in the provision of feedback – that is, offering feedback in a variety of forms including assessment templates/rubrics, written feedback on assignments, online discussion postings, in class questions/answers and opportunities for individual face to face consultations – is the key to pedagogical inclusivity. Using short answer questions instead of multiple-choice for assessment is beneficial for students as multiple choice limits the amount and type of feedback that can be provided. In some disciplines it is possible to give detailed feedback in addition to grades. Feedback without grades in some cases is more beneficial for learning as students read it more carefully (Black & William, 1998).

Permitting students to take part in the development of curricula standards and assessment criteria through the provision of ongoing/formative feedback throughout the course is one way of encouraging accessibility, inclusivity, participation and achievement. Birenbaum (2007) advocates for the adaption of assessment to fit students’ affective as well as cognitive characteristics, specifically allowing students to choose their preferred type of assessment to best suit their preferred learning styles and achievement level. While this is a good idea in theory, it may be that student preferences are not what will best facilitate their learning and do not fit with the expectations of higher education institutions. Nevertheless, research suggests that being excluded from the assessment process limits the skills students develop and lessens their ability to understand and incorporate feedback in their work even when feedback is effectively provided (Taras, 2006).

Peer feedback encourages all students to engage actively in discussion. However, our research suggests that this form of feedback is used less frequently than other types (Rowe & Wood, 2008a). Opportunities to engage in collaborative learning allow students to share responsibility for their individual and collective learning (Pilner & Johnson, 2004). Self-assessment is an alternative and requires students to reflect on their own learning. It has been found to empower students by improving their understanding of assessment practice and grading criteria, and promotes self-directed learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Taras, 2006).
Posting general feedback online and having feedback in an electronic form may assist students who have hearing, sight impairments/sensory disabilities, or those from CALD backgrounds, who may not feel comfortable asking questions in class. Having feedback available in electronic format allows sight-impaired students to access feedback in an appropriate mode. Engaging students verbally where possible is helpful for those who have difficulty reading and writing. In the present feedback study, international students preferred verbal feedback because of the ability to seek immediate clarification (Rowe & Wood, 2008b).

University is a time of heightened psychological distress (Bewick, Koutspoulou, Miles, Slaa, & Barkham, 2010). Anxiety is widely experienced, and is arguably higher for first year and international students (Bewick et al., 2010; Douglass & Islam, 2009; Robotham & Julian, 2006). Students experiencing anxiety may be sensitive to what they perceive as criticism from others and it is important that feedback be explicit, offered promptly and in a format that students find non-threatening (ADCET, 2009). For example, students may find verbal feedback preferable so they have sufficient time to resolve matters, and not be left feeling anxious. For others, written feedback may be more appropriate if face to face contact increases anxiety. This will allow students to read and digest the feedback in their own time. Again this highlights the importance of providing a variety of feedback types and discussing individual needs with the student.

Timing of feedback

In our study the timing of feedback provided was identified as a source of dissatisfaction for students, a finding replicated in other studies (Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Williams & Kane, 2007). Feedback is most effective when given shortly after completion of an assessment task, allowing students sufficient time to reflect and learn from the task (Weaver, 2006). It is important that feedback is provided early in order to identify students at risk. Slow turnaround times were a major issue raised by participants in our feedback study, with some students reporting that no substantial formative feedback was provided until after the final exam. Surprisingly, 14% of students said they received none or rarely received any feedback (Rowe et al., 2008). Late feedback encourages a surface learning approach and can be perceived by students as disrespectful and alienating (Rowe & Wood, 2008a, 2008b). Many students in the feedback study felt that academics should be held accountable for marking assignments on time, in return for the deadlines they are expected to meet when submitting assignments. Many compared the effort they invested in assessment tasks to the amount of effort taken by teachers to provide helpful feedback (Rowe & Wood, 2008b).

Providing students with opportunities to participate in formative assessments throughout the semester, as a precursor diagnostic test, will assist in encouraging the continued participation of students who may otherwise leave university (Tinto, 2000, 2003). Equity proponents suggest that opportunity without support is not opportunity at all; by analogy, the provision of higher education without adequate support systems and tools in place would be a barrier to continued participation and excellence in the higher education sector (Pilner & Johnson, 2004).

With workload pressures and time constraints on academic staff, a focus is needed on the provision of detailed and inclusive feedback that does not require additional time and effort. Both peer and self evaluation provide students with opportunities to develop the capacity to regulate their own learning and ease the workload of their teachers (Nicol &
Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) as well as providing enhanced student learning. A further option is the use of web based systems (e.g. the Computer Aided Feedback and Assessment System), which are designed to assist academics provide timely, high quality feedback with less time required than other feedback methods.

**Content of feedback**

The content of feedback is most effective when it is comprehensive, specific, descriptive and focused (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004/05; Rucker & Thomson, 2003). Students in our study conceptualised feedback predominately as a source of information on course/teacher expectations, and the actions required to improve performance. Care needs to be taken in what is said to students and how it is communicated. The nature of feedback has the ability to motivate and/or discourage students, and encouragement is a better motivator than criticism (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). Overly critical feedback on personal characteristics will likely have a negative impact on ‘at risk’ students because of its effects on their motivation, self-esteem and self-efficacy. If a student is seeking encouragement and only receives comments on their errors, it may not support their learning in the most effective way. By contrast, feedback concerning content provides the student with options for action (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004/05). Self-efficacy is important because it is strongly related to effort and persistence with tasks, predicts academic achievement and the adoption of deep approaches to learning (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003).

Clarifying expectations of learning objectives, assessment and how grades are determined also constitute appropriate and inclusive feedback. The provision of clear and consistent expectations has been linked to increased student learning and persistence (Tinto, 2000). Some additional points to consider are: when hand-written, care needs to be taken to ensure that comments are easy to read, and oral information should be supported with written material. Ensuring that feedback is free of culturally or gender biased examples and is responsive to different language levels is another consideration. To be inclusive, feedback needs to be unambiguous and in plain English. The use of unnecessary colloquialisms and acronyms ought to be avoided as they may alienate some student groups; when used they should be explained. The assumption that students do not value or use feedback disadvantages students and creates a biased perception of their motivations and needs. A substantial body of research suggests that students do value and use feedback (Higgins et al., 2002; Rowe & Wood, 2008b; Weaver, 2006).

**Student-teacher relationships**

A growing body of research points to the importance of student-teacher relationships in learning, particularly in the provision of feedback (Cameron, 2008; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Price et al., 2010; Rowe, in press). Relationships between students and teachers are integral to student success at university, positively impacting on academic performance, satisfaction with university life, retention, educational and career goals (as reported in Bernier, Larose, & Soucy, 2005; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). In our study, teachers’ attitudes and individual traits were perceived to play a role in the type and quality of feedback they provided (similar findings have been reported by Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Poulos & Mahony, 2008). A number of participants attributed their negative perceptions of feedback to poor communication by teaching staff. They wanted teaching staff to engage all students, for
example, by facilitating group work where all students were encouraged to participate irrespective of their cultural background.

For many students, especially those in first year, feedback provides one of the few opportunities for interpersonal contact with teaching staff, thus meeting a range of students’ psycho-social needs, which include feeling valued and part of the academic community. Given that relationships are essential in order for learning to occur, the lack of opportunities for interpersonal contact can make the pedagogical experience for first year and international students particularly alienating. Arguably the two groups that need the most support are often the ones who do not receive it.

In our study feedback was linked to participation in many students’ minds, and students needed an opportunity to engage with teachers and/or their peers about feedback (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Rowe, in press). While this is difficult to do in large classes, it can be more easily achieved in tutorials and online. Engaging with students enables the establishment of a shared understanding of course/teacher expectations and the curricula. While all students benefit from positive relationships with teachers, relationships are especially important for students experiencing significant external barriers to engagement in university study, such as those from low socio-economic backgrounds (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008; Pearce, 2007). Having tutors who can clearly explain expectations and provide frequent feedback is vital; when tutors do not recognise the impact of disadvantages that many students face, they fail to engage in relating and add to the existing disadvantage (Pearce, 2007). Validation activities such as showing pleasure in and praising students’ work, providing one on one contact and support and encouraging self-efficacy can foster student success by increasing students’ confidence and interest (Kinzie et al., 2008).

As Talbot (2004) notes, attitudes can make all the difference. Being sensitive to diverse student needs is central to the creation of supportive learning environments. Recent studies have recommended that teachers reflect on and (re)conceptualise their notions of student diversity in order to consider how they might redesign curricula and pedagogy to allow for greater student involvement (Hockings, 2008). One way of doing this is to demonstrate an awareness and understanding of the socio-cultural and personal similarities and differences that may be encountered (Hockings et al., 2007; Reid, Petocz, Braddock, Taylor, & McLean, 2007). Lecturers who develop strategies to learn more about their students’ lives can create learning environments that work for the range of students with whom they are teaching (Hockings et al., 2007). For example, a teacher can ask students to post a short PowerPoint presentation on their background to introduce themselves to the class and the teacher.

In our study, several students commented that if one had to ask for feedback, it was not feedback – feedback by definition was volunteered by the teacher. This is an interesting finding, given research suggests that feedback is more effective when students proactively seek it (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004/05). Variation in our study participants’ views on what feedback entails may be due to their failure to accurately identify feedback in all its forms. Special steps to engage students may assist in this respect, e.g. lecturers could be explicit, giving explanations as to why they are providing feedback in a particular form. Resource constraints mean that individual consideration may not always be as possible as desired and a balance of positive feedback including encouragement and constructive comments on errors may be viewed as good practice.
Where there are mismatches between student and teacher understandings and expectations, the focus needs to be on aligning these perceptions. Professional development programs provide an essential opportunity for staff to communicate and reflect upon their feedback practices in teaching diverse groups of students. It is important that staff develop an awareness of cultural open-mindedness and a responsibility towards the participation and achievement of all students in the higher education sector (Hellstën & Prescott, 2004). In order to bridge the gap between university staff and student conceptions of what constitutes inclusive and effective feedback, students also need to be provided with this opportunity. To be effective, both staff and students must be committed to this process (Talbot, 2004).

Conclusion

This chapter has offered some practical suggestions for integrating inclusive practice principles and strategies into the provision of assessment feedback. While it was beyond the scope of the present study to investigate teacher perceptions of feedback, a review of the literature suggests mismatches in expectations are likely contributing to the perception by students that they are not being provided with enough quality feedback. An increasing number of Australian universities are developing websites with resources and strategies to assist teachers to incorporate inclusive practices within their curricula. Despite these advances, research suggests there is a tendency to conceptualise ‘non-traditional’ student populations as ‘problematic’, in need of being ‘accommodated’, and in some cases ‘excluded’ from university (for a discussion of these issues refer to Hockings, 2010; Pilner & Johnson, 2004). As Pilner and Johnson (2004 p. 108) note:

Educators often converse about the performance levels or abilities of student ‘others’ (students with disabilities, students of color, non-native English learners etc.) and equate ‘substandard academic performance’ with social group membership. What rarely is addressed in such conversations are the structural and institutional barriers that restrict ‘others’ from equally accessing teaching and learning. If we do not explicitly exclude students by assuming their abnormality or inability to succeed, we often exclude by the ways we structure our curricular practices.

There is a need for the higher education sector to move beyond simply meeting legislative requirements to assess the visible and hidden barriers that deny access and opportunity to traditionally subordinated student populations (Pilner & Johnson, 2004). Inclusive feedback, when incorporated effectively, is one way of reducing barriers to learning and enhancing the participation of all students.

Future research would benefit from a deeper understanding of student and faculty perceptions, in order to determine to what extent their expectations align, and where they differ. A challenge to enhancing feedback is uniting the diverse academic and student perspectives on the feedback process (Carless, 2006), and as Bailey and Garner (2010 p. 196) aptly state:

There is a common ground in the lived experience of higher education: teachers, like students, may experience a sense of disengagement with higher education practices ostensibly designed to support pedagogical
and communicative interactions. Both parties may wonder if feedback is worth the paper it is written on.

The use of online technology provides a way of addressing some of the resource limitations faced when teaching diverse groups of students within the context of high student-staff ratios. Intervention studies to evaluate different inclusive feedback practices as well as further investigation into student and staff perceptions of feedback will be of great assistance for educators and teachers working to enhance the experiences and outcomes of all students.
References


