



CHOBE Special Interest Group Series  
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# Who Wants Feedback Anyway?

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## About CHOBE and the Special Interest Group (SIG) Project

CHOBE supports and represents, with a voice of influence, those with strategic responsibility of the development and delivery of graduate and postgraduate education and research within the disciplines of construction property and surveying. CHOBE's objectives include:

- Developing communities of practice in built environment education to support heads of department/schools (or nominees) in the UK and Ireland.
- Influencing policy consultations through being the collective contact point for issues about built environment education for external stakeholders and Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies.
- Providing a forum in which people can come together to network, share and address problems in a supportive and collaborative way.
- Addressing the practical, day-to-day matters associated with learning, teaching and assessment.
- Funding to initiate larger research projects that can have an impact on how we deliver our businesses.

In June 2023 CHOBE invited proposals to establish Special Interest Groups (SIGs) for the forthcoming academic year. The purpose was to carry out small, targeted research into specific themes facing Built Environment educators. Each group was led by an expert in that field who will worked in association with a number of interested academics to discuss and identify different forms of innovation and good practice. Four SIGs were supported with a grant of £3000 each.

## Executive Summary

Accessing feedback is widely regarded as a fundamental action in educational attainment. However, there is a gap around understanding if Built Environment students access feedback, and the impact accessing feedback has on grades achieved. Analysis of 494 student submissions and associated feedback engagement, linked to the submission's awarded grade, revealed a correlation between the higher the grade boundary achieved, and whether or not students engaged with feedback. Interviews with student participants revealed that the majority of those who engaged with feedback found it useful to aid reflection and development. However, of those who did not engage with feedback, some remained of the opinion feedback was unhelpful and delivered at the incorrect time in their studies (formative as opposed to summative). It appears, for feedback to be maximised for maximum benefit to all students, Higher Education Institutions may want to clearly communicate the correlation of accessing feedback and the achievement of higher average grade boundaries, as well as have a greater focus on formative feedback as this most closely represents the students' perceptions of what appropriate feedback should entail.

## 1.0 Introduction

The following Council of the Heads of Built Environment (CHOBE) Special Interest Group (SIG) project focuses on student feedback. Feedback is a key ingredient in effective curriculum design and the student learning experience. It has been explored from numerous perspectives, however, there is a current gap in literature pertaining to how and why different students engage with feedback from the perspective of the students themselves.

First, this project briefly outlines some of the key literature arguments pertaining to feedback in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) before clarifying the research problem under investigation. The aim of the SIG is then presented before the two research phases outlined. The findings are then discussed before recommendations drawn from the data. This report then discusses the authors background and acknowledges the support and purpose of CHOBE. The results of this SIG were presented to CHOBE members in May 2024.

## 2.0 Background

### 2.1 Skills Shortages in UK Construction

Careers in the Built Environment are arguably both challenging and rewarding, and have been increasing in demand for many years. This demand has covered both the professional and trade roles and is the result of both a buoyant construction industry and an increasing skills shortage. The skills shortage of trades has been reported upon for many years, with one study from over two decades ago discussing the numerous strategies and initiatives launched from both the government and the industry itself aimed at increasing the number of skilled workers in the industry (Mackenzie et al., 2000). Such skills shortages are still present today as more recent studies discuss the same issues (see Maqbool et al., 2024). However, research has previously claimed that skill shortages impact managerial and professional roles as much as they do operational, but the former fail to receive the same attention (Dainty et al., 2005). Graduates of Built Environment Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) who go on to fill many of these professional roles are therefore arguably just as in demand as operational and trade staff.

The increasing size of the UK construction industry is arguably contributing to the skills shortage problem as more and more professionals are in demand each year. The UK construction industry's economic output increased from 2021 to 2022 by over 15%, some £132,989 million, with new construction orders rising by 11.4% year on year (ONS, 2023). This increasing industry output will continue to put more pressure on the skills shortages the industry is facing, resulting in a higher demand for trained construction industry graduates.

## 2.2 Curriculum Design in Higher Education Institutes

HEI's provide a comprehensive and robust learning environment aimed at increasing a student's employability and general skills for life (Brint, 2018). To ensure such students are suitably trained, higher education courses are designed with a robust curriculum and ensure students suitably progress from one level to the next (Khan and Law, 2015). Curriculum design has been described as crucial for higher education effectiveness (Barnett and Cole, 2005). Any curriculum should be clear on its taught content, with such content co-created with appropriate stakeholders and focused around the current and future skills students will need (Khan and Law, 2015).

Curriculum development research in HEI is often considered a little disconnected, with this especially prevalent in construction management research (Posillico et al., 2022). This research also finds that often curriculum can be developed to focus on lecturer skills rather than student requirements and calls for greater collaboration between government and industry bodies to ensure students achieve relevant professional skills (Posillico et al., 2022). Previous research has identified significant gaps in the level of knowledge gained by HEI students and the industry requirements they are faced with post-graduation (Azapagic et al., 2007). However, effective curriculum development alone is arguably not enough to support the development of student learning with a multi-faceted approach required to maximise student development, knowledge sharing, and overall educational experience (Doyle, 2023). One essential component of this approach is the feedback students receive, with feedback often described as essential in a learner's journey (Scott and Fortune, 2013). The importance of feedback is said to be of the utmost importance in student development and learning (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005).

### 2.3 Student Feedback

In a HEI setting, feedback can be defined as information given from lecturers to students in an effort to develop their understanding and help enhance their future work quality (Scott, 2014). To date, the feedback practices, experiences, and expectations of students at HEIs have been explored from numerous perspectives. One such perspective is a focus on the mode of feedback delivery (Henderson and Phillips, 2019). Another is the exploration of the dialogue feedback generates between lecturers and students (Winstone et al., 2017). Studies have also explored how the quality of feedback can be improved to aid the development of students (Dunworth and Sanchez, 2016).

Feedback has also been considered in an academic setting from the perspective of how lecturers receive and action feedback from students. One study considered how lecturers react to feedback and found such reactions can be feelings of shame, blame, tame, or reframe (Arthur, 2009). Another study has considered feedback from the perspective of teachers gathering feedback from students in an effort to enhance their own future performance (Mandouit, 2016). One study also explores the frustration lecturers feel when students demonstrate limited feedback engagement (Price et al., 2011). Feedback can therefore serve a multitude of purposes for all stakeholders involved. However, feedback itself has been found to often be insufficient to aid development, delivered inconsistently, difficult to comprehend by the intended recipient, and even sometimes found to be discouraging towards improvement (Winstone et al., 2017). There have been growing calls that in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of feedback, a collaborative approach between students and lecturers is required (Nash and Winstone, 2017).



One criticism of the studies on feedback to date includes the fact they often presuppose both lecturers and students share the same understanding of what feedback is (Molloy et al., 2020). This can be potentially problematic if perspectives are mismatched in that such a mismatch will prevent both effective feedback delivery and effective feedback receipt. Effectively delivering timely feedback has therefore been described as of crucial importance for student development (Khan and Law, 2015). However, there is a lack of research currently around which students access feedback, and then if and how this feedback is actioned. This Special Interest Group project explores this gap in knowledge through a two stage research process.

### 3.0 Research Problem

The research problem this Special Interest Group sought to address is the understanding why some students do not access feedback given its importance in the educational journey. There is a paucity of research pertaining to feedback usage from the perspectives of Higher Education students. Whilst feedback has been explored from numerous perspectives, understanding which students access feedback and why, from the perspective of students themselves has yet to be explored in great detail. A greater understanding of feedback from such perspectives could potentially aid lecturer delivery of feedback and enhance the student learning journey.

### 4.0 Aim

This aim of this study is to understand which students engage with feedback, and the form this engagement takes.

## 5.0 Research Design

This research consisted of two main phases.

### 5.1 Research Phase One

The first adopts an objectivism standpoint. Objectivism implies social phenomena exist independent of social actors (Robson and McCartan, 2017). This objectification of knowledge advocates a positivist approach that ultimately determines an ontological and epistemological position is best understood through quantitative data as trends and patterns can be identified and analysed (Clark et al., 2021). An inductive approach is adopted whereby theories are generated from research observations (Bell et al., 2022). In this research such observations are drawn from an analysis of the data available. The data is anonymised records of student grades and whether or not summative feedback was then requested on each grade. The data is in Microsoft Excel form and covers a total of 494 Level 6 Built Environment students over a 4 year period (20-21 – 23-24). The data was collated, compared, and analysed using the analysis tools as part of Microsoft Excel. The data and patterns identified were then used as the basis to inform the second research package.

### 5.2 Research Phase Two

The second research package consists of a constructivism ontological assumption. This implies the social phenomena are socially constructed and so are therefore best understood via an interpretivist epistemological approach (Clark et al., 2021). Purposive sampling was adopted whereby participants who could best inform the research were approached for inclusion (Robson and McCartan, 2017). The findings of the first research package then informed semi

structured interviews that were conducted with twelve student participants to gain a better insight into their requests (or lack thereof) for feedback and the use of this feedback. Semi-structured interviews allow a core topic to be pursued whilst allowing the flexibility to remain to pursue interesting avenues that may arise during the course of the interviews (Clark et al., 2021). The interview questions were structured using narrative analysis, a method by which questions are framed around the request for stories, with information then extracted, and is a technique that has been used increasingly in recent Built Environment research (Watts et al., 2023).

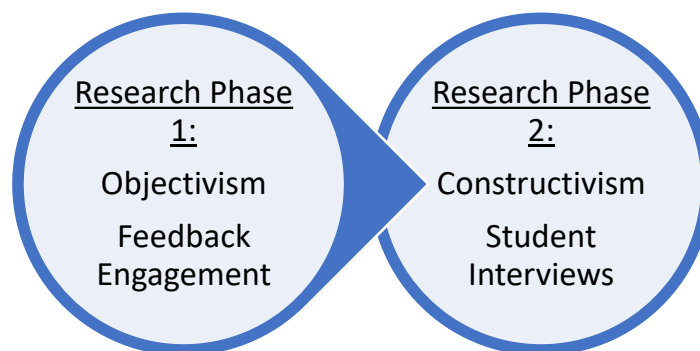


Figure 1.0 Research Phase Design

## 6.0 Key Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the grade data via Microsoft Excel revealed several key areas of interest. Firstly, table 1.0 represents the total students analysed as part of this study and their breakdown for grades achieved and if feedback was requested:

	Grades Achieved					Total Students
	70+	60-69	50-59	40-49	<39	
<b>Students who accessed feedback (no):</b>	91	69	16	7	5	<b>188</b>
<b>As a %</b>	53.22%	34.67%	20.51%	20.00%	45.45%	38.06%
<b>Student who DID NOT access feedback (no):</b>	80	130	62	28	6	<b>306</b>
<b>As a %</b>	46.78%	65.33%	79.49%	80.00%	54.55%	61.94%
<b>Total students:</b>	171	199	78	35	11	<b>494</b>

Table 1.0: Total students by grade

Table 1.0 reveals that overall, nearly 62% of students did not access feedback regarding their submission. Figure 2.0 analyses the data for patterns and trends by grade achieved and illustrates the 'U' shape pattern that emerges within the data with regards to those who accessed feedback. The data indicates the higher or lower the grade achieved, the more likely the student was to access the feedback.

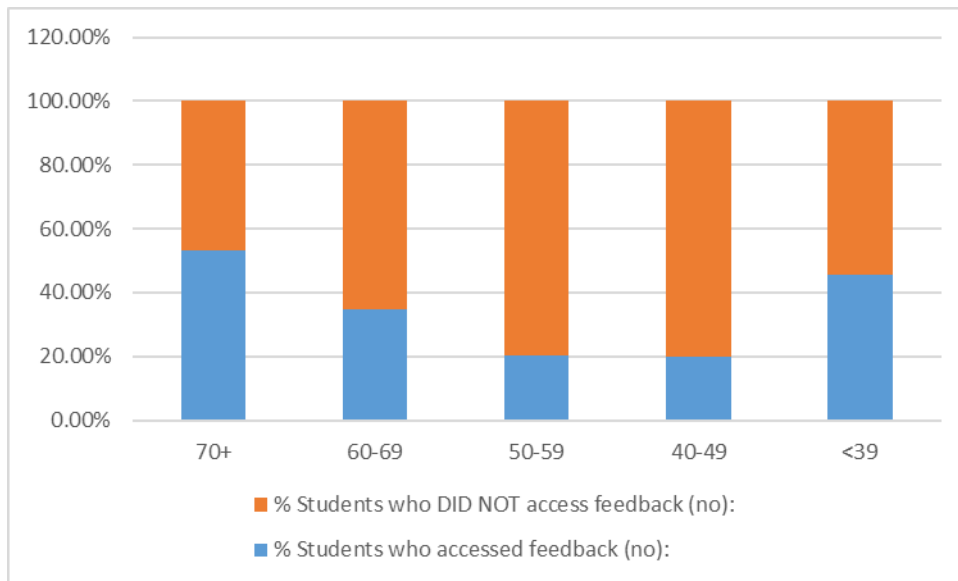


Figure 2.0: Student's accessing feedback by grade received.

The data also reveals that 53% of students who achieve 70+ in their grade will engage with feedback. Whereas only 20% of students who achieve between 50 and 59% engaged with feedback, and only 20% of those who achieved between 40 and 49%. These statistics are somewhat surprising as arguably those who achieve the lowest grade are those most in need of feedback, and so would benefit most from feedback engagement.

The findings from research package one then informed the development of the interview questions for research package two. Each student was asked what their average grade was and then further questions around their perspectives of feedback. Table 2.0 shows each participant, their reported grade 'average', and when asked, if they stated they accessed feedback or not:

Participant	Av. Grade	Feedback Accessed
A	70+	Yes
B	70+	Yes
C	70+	Yes
D	70+	No
E	60-69	Yes
F	60-69	No
G	60-69	No
H	50-59	Yes
I	50-59	No
J	50-59	No
K	40-49	Yes

Table 2.0: Interview Participant Details

The interviews added insight to the data analysis findings of the first research package and revealed the following key themes:

### 6.1 The purpose of feedback

All participants who reported to not access feedback also reported they simply did not see the benefit of feedback. Whilst some were not aware of the correct terminology, participant G articulated well a belief shared by those participants who reported they did not access feedback “what’s the point reading formative feedback...it’s too late for that assignment...summative feedback is the only type [of feedback] worth spending time on”. Participant G reported an average grade of between 60-69, but this perception of feedback was also echoed by Participant D who confirmed “I don’t really use the feedback as I’ve already got the grade”. Participant I stated, “all assignment requirements are different...how will one feedback help another [assignment]”.

Interestingly, such sentiments were not only openly stated by those participants who did not access feedback who were reporting their average grades to be between 60-69, but also by

those who did not access feedback who reported their average grades to be between 50-59. Arguably, feedback helps all students improve, especially those most in need of improvement whose grades could be significantly enhanced, but the participants who did not regularly access feedback did not appear to agree. However, all participants who stated they did regularly access feedback all espoused the benefits they experienced as a result. Participant B reported how feedback had helped them “increase their grade” from one module to the next, with participant A discussing how they find many shared learning opportunities between modules, even where different modules have different submission requirements. Participants C and E both recognised the benefits of feedback and believed the purpose of feedback is to aid reflection and analysis of where improvements can be made. Participant C stated accessing feedback helps “avoid making any mistakes twice”. Those participants who reported they accessed feedback were more likely to report having higher average grades, and those who saw and understood the purpose of feedback, were more likely to access feedback.

## 6.2 Discussing the quantitative data from research package one

The data regarding the average grade boundaries of those students who accessed feedback and those who did not, and the trend that the more likely a student was to access feedback, the higher their average grade was likely to be, was presented to the participants. All participants who reported they accessed feedback stated they were “not surprised” (participant A) and believing it “makes sense” (participant C). However, some participants who reported they did not access feedback did not agree with the data, with participant D stating “I don’t think that’s true for everyone...maybe just those you looked at” and participant G believing “I think feedback just works for some people, I don’t think it makes any difference



to me". However, participants I and J were more receptive to the idea of accessing feedback correlating to higher grades, and towards the end of their respective interviews both stated this 'new' awareness would result in them accessing feedback in future. Whilst no causation can be linked between feedback being accessed and the average grade banding achieved, a correlation is illustrated in this research. The interviews reveal how for some students, presentation of this correlation can lead to a positive change in accessing future feedback, yet for others who do not currently access feedback, the data and correlation presented makes no change to their feedback accessing plans.

## 7.0 Recommendations

1. Feedback should be both specific to the assessment for which it relates, and broad enough to be transferred to future assessments that may not be directly related to the initial assessment in which the feedback is based. Some students did report a lack of feedback engagement was due to them not having the same module content / submission context requirements repeated in future modules.
2. Both formative and summative feedback should be overtly used by lecturers, so students are aware of the types, and the benefits and timing of each.
3. There is a correlation between the higher grade a student received, and if that student accessed and engaged with feedback. This correlation should be shared with all students at the start of each module.
4. To address this correlation, targeted efforts should be made by lecturers to all students regarding the benefits of feedback, with clear messages around when and how it is available.
5. There will remain some students who do not access feedback, and struggle through their studies because of this, perhaps not achieving the highest grade they could. For such students' innovative methods of feedback delivery, and education around the benefits of feedback, need to be established.

## 8.0 About the Author

Dr Greg Watts is a Senior Lecturer, Department Lead for Research and Knowledge Exchange, and Programme Lead for the BSc Quantity Surveying programme at the University of Salford. Prior to commencing a career in academia Greg worked as a Senior Quantity Surveyor for numerous main contractors in the construction industry. Greg has over 40 publications to date, ranging from award winning conference papers, journal publications, and three textbooks: Professional Ethics for Construction and Surveying, CPD in the Built Environment, and Introduction to Built Asset Management. Greg's research interests include Risk Management, Modern Methods of Construction, Procurement, Social Value, Sustainability, Digital Construction, Mega-projects, and Pedagogy.

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