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“To listen or to read?” Audio or written assessment feedback for international students in the UK

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Abstract

Purpose – *In response to the less satisfied National Student Survey, UK universities have committed to transform assessment and feedback experience. This paper aims to explore how the diversity of online assessment and feedback offer a better learning experience for international students.*

Design/methodology/approach – *By using the action research method, the research investigated academic and international students' first experience on audio feedback and online text. Video interviews and online questionnaires were carried out.*

Findings – *All research participants would like to receive assessment feedback in audio form. This reflects the learning experience of students and suggests that the support of a higher educational institution or a tutor could provide for assessment and feedback enhancement in the digital world is mandatory. Other than the technological and instrumental advantage, the “human element” of audio feedback makes it unique and interesting to listen to in contrast to online written feedback.*

Research limitations/implications – *It is recognised that the number of student participants was small but the qualitative findings demonstrate some key issues in relation to international student experience and the effectiveness and engagement of assessment feedback that may inspire future empirical research.*

Practical implications – *Some conditions under which feedback is likely to be effective are not met as frequently as originally believed, audio feedback can be thoughtfully considered as an alternative assessment feedback mechanism for international students.*

Originality/value – *The “human element” of audio assessment feedback “defeats online written text for international students. They appreciate the effort spent by the tutor to provide them assessment and feedback personally by “talking to them”.*

Keywords *Blended learning, Online assessment, Assessment and feedback, Audio feedback, Technology enhanced learning, Turnitin GradeMark*

Paper type *Research paper*

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1. Introduction

In response to the less satisfied National Student Survey (NSS, 2009), UK universities have committed to transform assessment and feedback experience for both local and international students. Internationalisation is an additional growing aspect for the UK higher education (HEA, 2011). In view of these two strands, it is necessary to explore the diversity of assessment and feedback experience for international students in the UK. Due to the foreign and new learning environment and ethos, international students may face numerous challenges in learning, teaching and assessment (Carroll, 2008). The UK higher education has vast research and practices in technology enhanced learning, teaching and assessment in the past decade (Salmon, 2002; Conole, 2010; Gwella, 2011). In addition, there is an increase of interest in online assessment in the UK higher educational institutions. Education and Learning Wales (ELWa) has affirmed that online technologies could support exciting, fulfilling and creative learning and teaching activities (Knight, 2004).

However, innovative developments in online technology are significant only if the learning is being enhanced. The focal point should be pedagogically enabling and empowering students to learn through technology – to enhance the learning, teaching and assessment experience rather than to promote the technology or to develop such innovative technology (Chew and Jones, 2009; HEFCE, 2009). More importantly, Race (1999, p. 27) stresses that the assessment “feedback quantity and quality are probably the most important factors in enhancing students’ learning”.

Graham (2006) suggests that technology may incrementally enhance the learning and teaching experience or even facilitate a radical transformation for educators of their teaching practice during the process of revisiting and redesigning by embedding technology. On the other hand, Strother (2003) states that technology enhanced learning research may lack consideration of different learning styles. He claims that multiple individual variables and learners’ styles must be addressed to provide an enhancement experience. Cross-cultural and differences of learning styles could have a major influence on the way instruction is shaped and the way learning takes place in a technology enhanced learning environment.

The famous Kolb’s classification of learning styles (Kolb, 1984) as accommodative, assimilative, divergent and convergent may relate to how far does technology enhance learning. Fleming’s VARK model (Fleming, 2001) categorises students to visual learners (pictures and movies), auditory learners (lectures and discussion), reading-writing preference learners (taking and reading notes and textbooks), kinesthetic learners or tactile learners (experiment and hands-on lab). Nevertheless, these learning styles tend to stigmatise and stereotype students and it is challenging for educators to contract and satisfy students of all learning styles. Hence, technology may provide an effective space to redesign the curriculum in such a flexible way those learners of every learning style could learn in different learning modes. It is similar context with assessment and feedback enhancement. It is possible to engage students of most learning styles with an educational technology, or a combination of a few educational technologies.

Thus, it is necessary to explore the use of what online assessment tools to give better assessment feedback for most students. The paper describes a pilot project which was inspired by two funded projects – the Sounds Good project (Rotheram, 2008) and the Turn it in and Turn it off project (Chew *et al.*, 2010), which investigated staff and students experiences on technology enhanced learning, teaching and assessment using online assessment submission and feedback. The former project explored audio feedback tools and the latter project studied the online text assessment and feedback system. The main aim of this project is to explore student and tutor experiences of using audio feedback on research-based economics assignments in comparison with Turnitin Grademark text-based feedback. The results of investigating tutor and students’ first experience with audio feedback for one assignment in the MBA module ER4S03 Economics Markets and Strategic Decisions are analysed and reported.

2. Methods

This project investigated the technology enhanced learning and teaching experiences at the Business School of the University of Glamorgan. By using the action research design (Koshy, 2005), a questionnaire was distributed to the students after the assessment and feedback (see Appendix 1). In addition, interviews with the academic and students were carried out. Content and compare analysis is the framework for analysing the total data set. Such procedure categorised each responses as pro and con at a high level coding scheme, and further juxtaposed audio versus written feedback experience by comparing and contrasting their pro and con.

This research provides experience sharing and critical analysis of the pedagogical and technological impact of audio feedback through MP3 recorder and Blackboard assignment tool, and written text feedback via GradeMark. The Blackboard assignment tool is an assessment tool on Blackboard that allows students to submit work and staff to return feedback on any form of file, such as audio file in this project. Turnitin is an online submission

and text matching system which integrated with the University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Blackboard. It allows tutors and students to check submitted coursework for potential plagiarism by comparing it against continuously updated databases and sources. GradeMark is an online grading tool developed by Turnitin which allows tutors to give students valuable and time sensitive feedback (Turnitin, 2013).

The tutor first set up Turnitin online submission links on the Blackboard module and requested their students to submit the coursework through the online Turnitin submission links. All 22 students were given online written feedback through GradeMark (see Figures 1 and 2) and this was followed by audio feedback (see Figure 3) for selected students – a mixture of best, good, average and poor students. MP3 recorder was used to record the audio feedback. Those audio files (assessment feedback) were being uploaded on to Blackboard (see Figure 4). To maximise the experience findings in this experience project, a

Figure 1 Online written feedback flow using Turnitin System

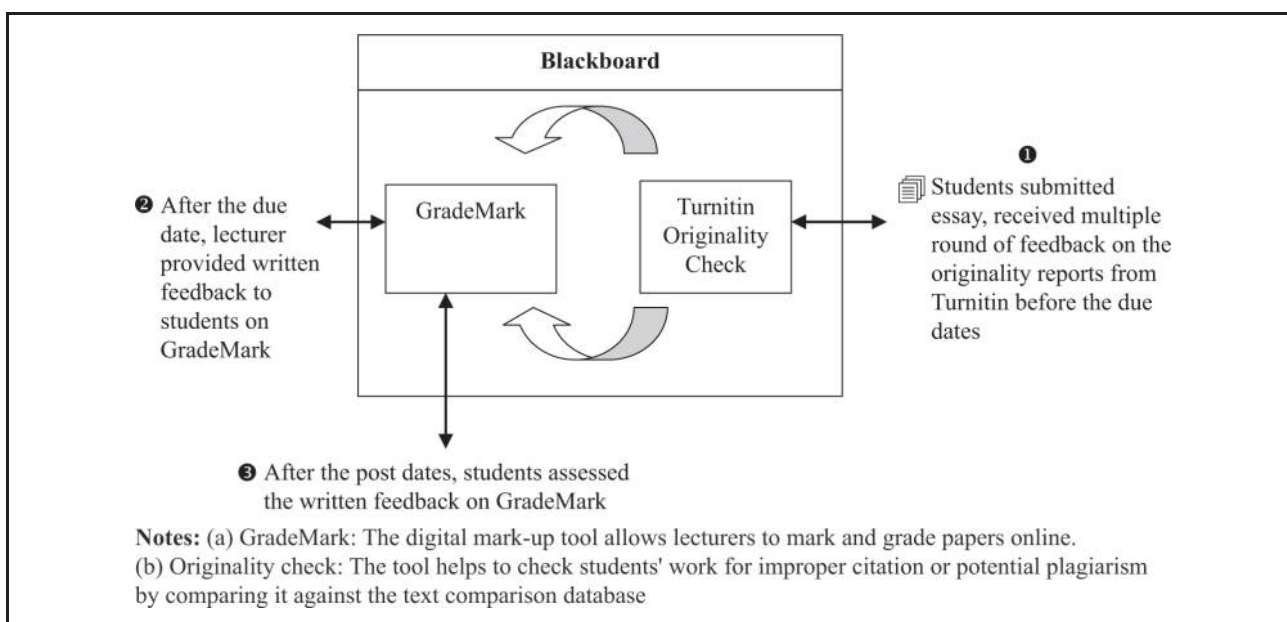


Figure 2 Screen shot for the GradeMark assessment feedback

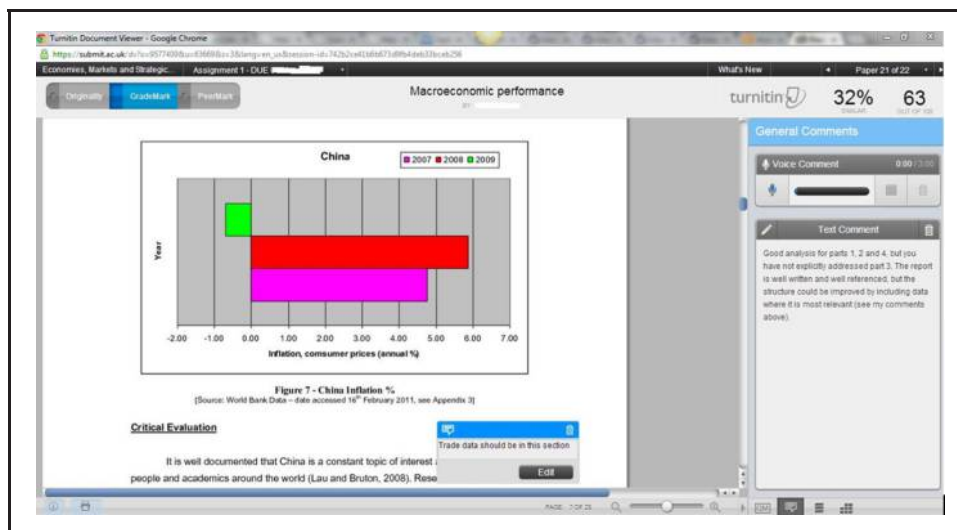


Figure 3 Audio Feedback Flow using Blackboard

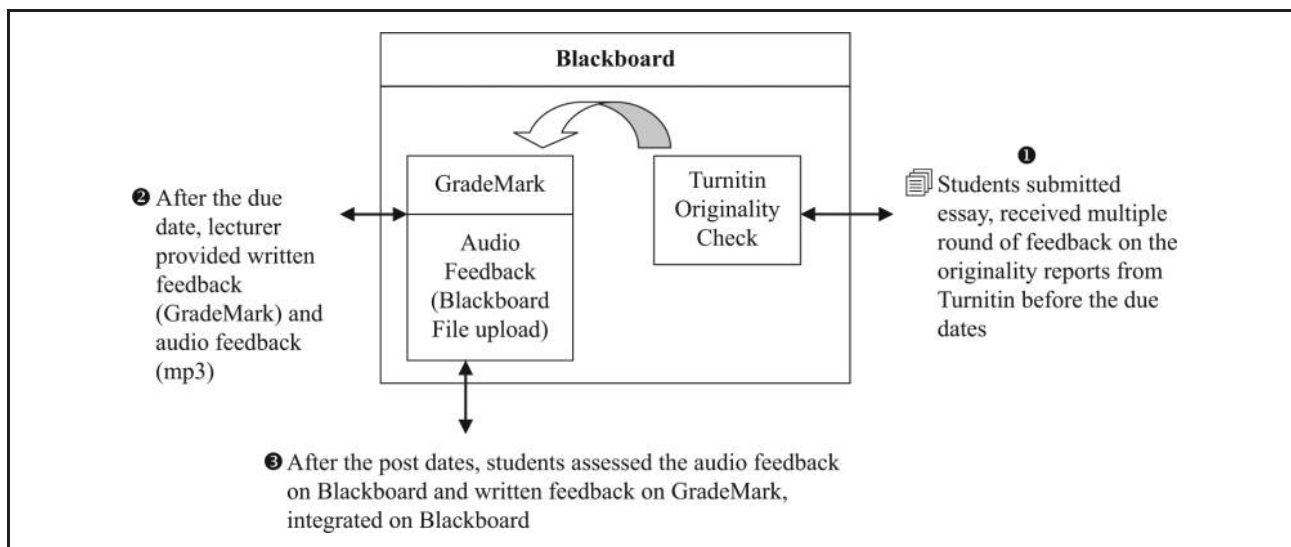
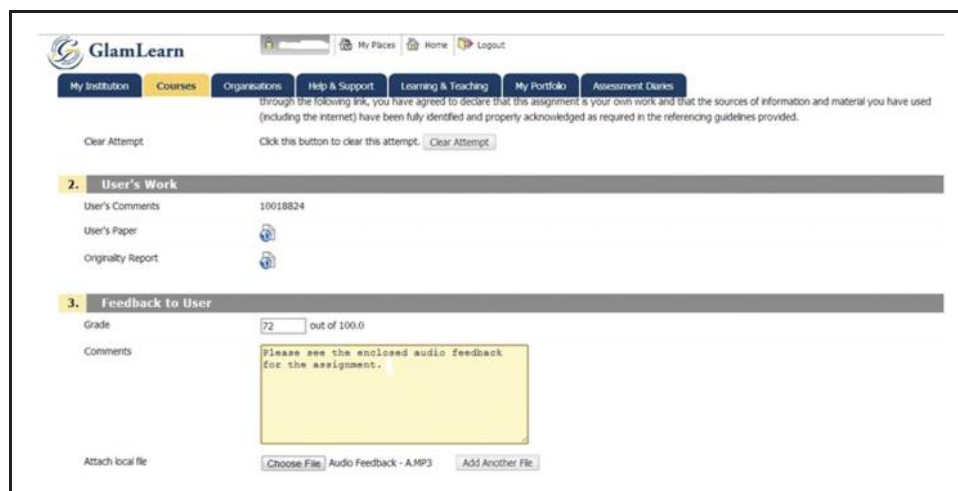


Figure 4 Screen shot for the Audio assessment feedback on Blackboard



range of formal and informal data collection instruments were used. These included video recorded face-to-face interviews with tutor and students, an online questionnaire and site visits to individual tutor's office for support and observation. Most of the questions were designed in a way to capture openly both tutor's and students' experiences.

3. Results and discussion

Five MBA students and the tutor were being video interviewed and completed questionnaires. All student responses clearly show that they like audio feedback and were keen to recognise the helpfulness and importance of the audio feedback. Certain phrases came out repeatedly: "personal touch", "personal feedback", "better feedback" and "interesting to listen to". The findings support the emerging view from literature to date such as Rotheram (2008) and Fell (2009) that audio feedback offers a more interesting and personalised assessment feedback to students. It is more engaging and helpful than written feedback. A number of responses described the superior qualities of audio feedback rather than written feedback such as subtleties and tone of voice provided by the former. Audio

feedback also increased student engagement with the assessment feedback as students feel that it is very interesting and more personal to listen to tutors' voices. The effort taken by the tutor to record the comments is much appreciated. Students would consider the feedback in details and pay more attention to listen to the feedback repeatedly. Since they are international students, this form of personal feedback meant a lot to them emotionally in that the tutor actually made the effort do some recordings for them "privately". Some responses prefer audio feedback to written feedback. These were described in both the questionnaires and interviews as follows,

Audio feedback provides more **concise and better** feedback.

On Blackboard (GradeMark) the comments are short and brief whereas in the **audio feedback, she tends to elaborate a little bit more**

It (audio feedback) could give us more detailed feedback than the Turnitin (GradeMark).

Audio feedback seems to be much **easier and comfortable** to listen to. . . like listen to your favorite DJ

It's **interesting** to listen to your tutor's voice than looking at the handwriting.

It's just like listen to your tutor through phone, it's better than written form of feedback!

Experiences of international students are particularly interesting within the context of internationalisation strategy at University of Glamorgan. There was an encouragingly positive learning engagement expressed in international students' responses for audio feedback. **They could listen to the feedback repeatedly until getting the message** whereas with face-to-face communication they sometimes kept embarrassingly saying "pardon me" due to the language and accent constraint. Both the audio feedback and online written feedback provided such "play back" facility 24/7.

On the other hand, a number of practical needs and technical issues were highlighted, such as an additional sentence of instruction on how to access the audio feedback, approaches to technical support and the sound qualities. At the same time a reference was made in a number of responses to the need to ensure that the recording is clear and comfortable. However, no students have problems to understand the content of audio feedback as the tutor has a clear English accent. Further questions could be posed from this angle – **How students would react to feedback from different teachers with different ways of English speaking and accents?**

Overall, the students found this to be a confirming and worthwhile experience. **There was also strong support of the concept of providing written feedback individually and audio feedback in general for the whole class as they complement each other** - "I feel that together they are excellent!" One response in particular emphasised the need to provide "video feedback" to ensure learning engagement and enhancement.

The tutor reported that providing audio feedback took the same amount of time per assignment as using Turnitin Grademark in-text comments, general comments and Rubric Scorecard. Some care was taken to personalise the audio feedback by using the student's name. It should be noted that the tutor knew all the students in the group well and was aware of their strengths and weaknesses. **Within the audio feedback the tutor found it easier to emphasise the aspects that students need to work on and feed forward into future assignments.** The tutor felt that it was a more personal, tailored way to give praise and encouragement to students than the written word. **It was considered that audio feedback was most suitable for "whole group" feedback and for smaller groups.** For very large groups the tutor may not have the same knowledge of individual students which would make it more difficult to personalise the feedback.

4. Conclusions

In sum, all international students in this pilot project would like to receive assessment feedback in audio form. Three of them indicated that they would like to receive only audio feedback and two of them preferred to receive feedback in both audio and written form. Interestingly, only one student expressed an interest in receiving audio feedback, online

written feedback through GradeMark and also hard copies. This reflects the learning trend of students and also suggests that the support of a higher educational institution or a tutor could provide for student assessment and feedback enhancement in the digital world is mandatory. This finding also supports research evidence that has been recognised by the JISC SLiDA study of how UK Higher Educational Institutions are supporting effective learners in a digital age.

This pilot experience was done with a reduced number of students since it is a small-scale action research. Thus, no strong conclusions can be drawn. It is recognised that the number of student participants was small. The findings, nevertheless, demonstrate some key issues in relation to international student experience and the effectiveness and engagement of assessment feedback that may inspire future research. By collecting a decent data set with a sample size which is sufficient to make more robust and concluding claims.

In addition, it would have been interesting to compare students' opinion with respect to the text transcriptions of the audio instead of mentioning generic text feedback. It will also be interesting to investigate whether students would prefer audio feedback or live video chat feedback sessions with the teachers. Further work from this pilot is to gather more international students' voices for the technology enhanced learning, teaching and assessment agenda (iLEXSIG, 2011; PeerMark, 2011). The aim to enhance the learning experience in the digital world is not merely about adopting fancy or powerful technology. It is neither the exaggerated claim that "technology will enhanced your learning experiences by using X technology" nor simple practice such as "using Y technology will improve a student's mark or speed up a lecturer's marking speed". It is all about learning and teaching enhancement with technology that leads to pedagogical benefits that are evidenced by student experience. Such experience may have technological and instrumental advantage but more importantly, audio feedback embraces the "human element" in contrast to online written feedback. This insight is described by research participant who voted for the "only audio assessment feedback" preference if given a choice of online written text or/and audio feedback:

The human element makes it unique and interesting to listen to...

Research participants generally appreciate the effort spent by the tutor to provide them assessment and feedback personally by "talking to them" – a personal feedback that impacts their learning experience. Furthermore, they are willing to repeatedly listen to the feedback for improvement. Since Glover and Brown (2006) indicate that some conditions under which feedback is likely to be effective are not met as frequently as originally believed, audio feedback can be thoughtfully considered as an alternative assessment feedback mechanism for international students. Future research such as the value of audio in support of inclusivity (i.e. in support of dyslexic, international students or learners) and more case studies are needed that really draw out this dimension.

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Further reading

Sharpe, R., Benfield, G., Roberts, G. and Francis, R. (2006), *The Undergraduate Experience of Blended E-learning: A Review of UK Literature and Practice*, The Higher Education Academy, York.

Figure A1

A. Student Questionnaire

The Exploration of the Innovative Online Assessment Feedback-Audio or Written Text?

1. How have you listened to the audio feedback? Please tick ALL that apply
 - ☐ On a University computer
 - ☐ On computer at home
 - ☐ On a computer somewhere else
 - ☐ On a portable audio player (e.g. MP3 player)
 - ☐ Some other way (please explain) _____
2. About how long was the audio feedback? Please tick
 - ☐ Less than 2 minutes
 - ☐ 2-5 minutes
 - ☐ More than 5 minutes
3. How easy was it to listen to the audio feedback? Please tick
 - ☐ Very easy
 - ☐ Fairly easy
 - ☐ Neither easy nor difficult
 - ☐ Fairly difficult (please explain)
 - ☐ Very difficult/impossible (please explain)
4. Do you like to listen to the audio feedback?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
5. In which way would you prefer to receive your assessment feedback?
 - ☐ Turnitin GradeMark (the red apple)
 - ☐ Audio Feedback
 - ☐ Hard/printed copies
6. Please explain the reasons for Question 5
7. How does audio feedback compare with written feedback (Turnitin GradeMark – the red apple)?
8. Would you like to receive audio feedback for future assignment?
 - ☐ Yes – the general feedback and comments would be helpful
 - ☐ Yes – the detailed feedback and comments would be helpful
 - ☐ No – I prefer Turnitin GradeMark
 - ☐ No – I prefer assessment feedback on printed copies
9. Do you have any other comments about receiving audio feedback?

Appendix 2. Video interview with student

The exploration of the innovative online assessment feedback – audio or written text?

1. What are your top positive experiences with audio feedback for your assessment?
 - Do you think that it enhanced your learning experience and how?
2. What are your top disconfirming experiences with audio feedback if there is any?
 - How they brought hassles to your learning experience or made you frustrated?
 - How you overcome these issues?

3. Please share your comparative experience of audio feedback and Turnitin GradeMark (the red apple). Which one would you prefer and why?
4. Any other thing you would like to share or to highlight?

Appendix 3. Related project websites and contacts

1. Audio Feedback Project:
 - [http://turnitin.wetpaint.com/page/Audi + Feedback + Project](http://turnitin.wetpaint.com/page/Audi+Feedback+Project)
2. Enhancing the international student experience with innovative assessment and feedback on postgraduate Economics studies at Glamorgan:
 - www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/mini/chew_international
3. Turn it in or Turn it off?:
 - [http://turnitin.wetpaint.com/page/Turn + it + in + or + Turn + it + off + Project](http://turnitin.wetpaint.com/page/Turn+it+in+or+Turn+it+off+Project)

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