# AN OVERVIEW OF CURRENT HIGHER EDUCATION FEEDBACK RESEARCH:

## IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPROVED FEEDBACK LITERACY

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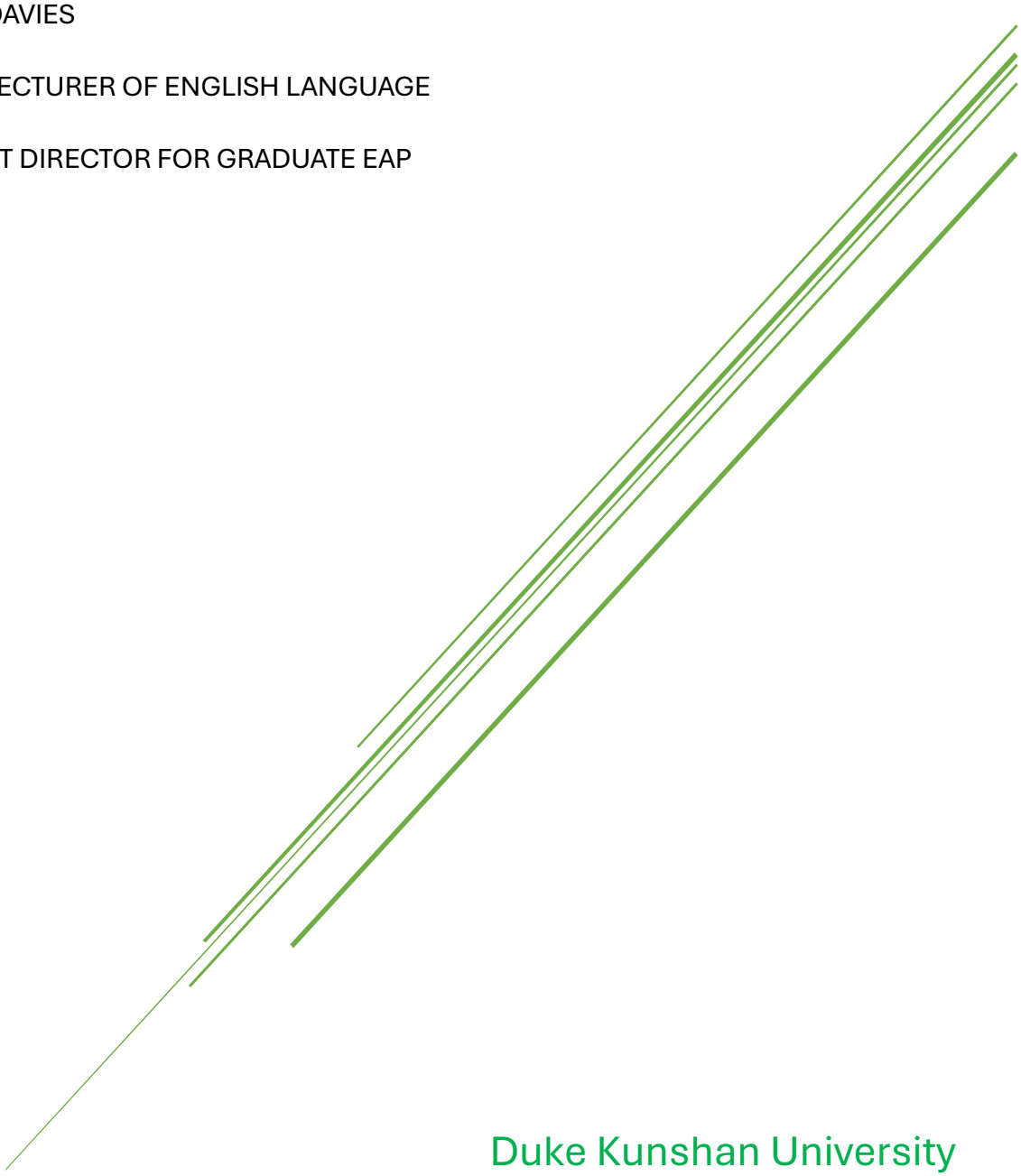

Duke Kunshan University
Institute for Global Higher Education

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## Contents

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report was commissioned by Duke Kunshan University's Institute for Global Higher Education (IGHE) and forms part of the pedagogical research and practice lab's initiative to enhance higher education teaching and learning. The report reviews the key research literature on feedback in higher education and explores how practices have shifted from outdated transmission-focused towards a more student-centered, learning-focused approach. Over the past two decades, understandings of feedback have evolved significantly toward a model that emphasizes students as active, agentic participants in the learning process. Contemporary perspectives position feedback not merely as information given by teachers but as a process of sense-making, dialogue, and action that helps learners improve both their academic work and their long-term learning habits.

However, despite such valuable insights, higher education feedback policy and practice do not appear to be adopting or promoting learning-focused feedback as much as they should. In response to this issue, a central concept and a current frontier of higher education assessment research is feedback literacy – a powerful phenomenon that can be viewed from the perspective of both learners and teachers and is essential for improving feedback practice. Developing students' feedback literacy requires intentional pedagogical design, opportunities for dialogue, and structured peer feedback. Teachers ultimately carry the responsibility for embedding these elements into curricula and assessment practices to create conditions that maximize the benefits of feedback. This report presents several interventions, as derived from the feedback research literature, that have potential applicability across various disciplines and contexts for developing feedback literacy.

Rather than simply summarize findings from the feedback research literature, the report attempts to identify gaps in the existing body of research and make viable suggestions for potential follow-up research and ongoing discussion to enhance higher education feedback practice. Moving forward, advancing feedback literacy requires more rigorous empirical studies, broader disciplinary perspectives, and a stronger focus on

outcomes-based research. Only through these efforts can higher education institutions ensure that feedback practices are truly enhancing student learning across cultures, contexts and disciplines. The report is organized around four key areas: the overall effect of feedback and feedback literacy on student learning outcomes; the mechanisms through which feedback operates; the confidence that can be placed in the current evidence base; and actionable recommendations for feedback practice within the DKU context.

Key Takeaways

- Feedback should be dialogic, ongoing, and learner-focused.
- Carefully designed peer feedback and feedback training play a vital role in building feedback literacy.
- Teachers' curriculum and assessment design are central to enabling feedback literacy.
- GenAI has a place for routine and formulaic feedback, but the uniquely human nature of recognition must be emphasized in feedback practice.
- Future empirical feedback research must include more varied cultural and disciplinary contexts.

## INTRODUCTION

The goal of this project is to review research about "higher education feedback" and provide an accessible summary report that is of practical value to higher education practitioners engaged with feedback. Feedback has the potential to play one of the biggest roles in higher education learners' development (Hattie & Timperley 2007). Despite this, students frequently report dissatisfaction with feedback in their higher education courses (Winstone & Carless 2020, 5) and teachers, despite their best efforts, are far too often left disappointed with students' ineffective use of feedback information (Price et al., 2010, 2011). This project is motivated by concerns among various higher education stakeholders about:

a) feedback processes taking up too much time
b) students not actually reading or using feedback
c) outdated information transmission modes of feedback dominating practice

d) the (in)appropriacy of certain feedback processes for students studying in a second or foreign language.

Duke Kunshan University has a specific interest in this topic because of its desire to increase faculty efficiency while maintaining high levels of academic support for students. For the purpose of this report, the scope of higher education feedback will focus only on university students' engagement with feedback on their academic work and ongoing learning (as opposed to students' feedback on teaching through course evaluation surveys, for instance).

Before addressing the four focal areas, it is important to briefly outline how feedback is conceptualized and how its research landscape has developed.

**WHAT IS FEEDBACK?**

Before delving into the literature to explore effective feedback practices, it is important to first establish what feedback actually is and how it is most commonly conceptualized. One of the key challenges to achieving successful feedback processes is the commonly reported incongruence between students' and teacher's perceptions of what feedback is (Adcroft 2011; Carless 2006; Dawson et al. 2018) and its varied conceptualization within higher education assessment and feedback policy texts (Davies, 2023). As such, it makes sense to arrive at an operationalized definition of feedback that can be used throughout this report. Despite some disagreement about what feedback actually is, this report will use the most agreed-upon and widely cited definition of feedback within the higher education research literature, which defines feedback as "a process through which learners make sense of information from various sources and use it to enhance their work or learning strategies" (Carless and Boud, 2018, 1315). The key feature of this definition is learners' sense-making and actual use of information. In fact, it has been argued that if learners fail to use the information they receive in feedback, it cannot be termed feedback and remains simply as information. Such arguments, which do have their critics, are at heart an attempt to encourage assessment designers and those involved directly in the feedback process to consider more carefully students' sense-making and use of feedback within the design of assessment and feedback mechanisms.

Conceptualizing feedback in this way requires educators to focus more on students using information to improve their academic work or learning strategies rather than simply providing information to learners. Such thinking has led to a theoretical paradigm shift in current feedback practice and understanding.

## WHAT IS THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF FEEDBACK RESEARCH?

Based on widely-reported concerns about the current state of higher education feedback practices, the research literature suggests there has been a paradigm shift from outdated old paradigm transmission-focused to new paradigm learning-focused feedback practices (Winstone & Carless 2020). This appears to be a response to serious student dissatisfaction with the feedback they encounter at university according to, admittedly poorly designed, student satisfaction survey data in Australia, The UK, and Hong Kong (Winstone & Carless 2020, p.5). With old paradigm transmission-focused feedback processes, teachers predominantly provide information to students with little room for dialogue, sense-making, uptake, and/or action. In contrast, with current learning-focused feedback processes, students take a central agentic role in feedback, source feedback from multiple sources and engage in dialogue and critical reflection to make sense of feedback information to take action. This paradigm shift aligns more with Carless and Boud's (2018, 1315) previously introduced definition of feedback as it implies that feedback can be generated from any information that learners use to improve their academic work or learning and that such information can come from multiple sources including teachers, peers, self, AI, rubrics, and assignment briefs, to name but a few.

Despite this widely acknowledged paradigm shift in feedback, the extent to which feedback practices have actually transformed into more learning-focused methods is questionable. For example, a linguistic analysis of 134 UK universities' documentation relating to educational strategies and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) Provider statements positioned students mostly as passive recipients of their teachers' feedback comments (Winstone, 2022). This highlights a clear gap between feedback research and practice, and it is perhaps worth exploring further what specific factors, be they cultural, pedagogical, logistical, knowledge/training-based, are inhibiting the implementation of such learning-focused feedback practices. Perhaps the problem lies

in underdeveloped feedback policy or a lack of research-informed evidenced based policy. For example, UK university policy texts on feedback have also been found to use language that is overly transmission-focused. Specifically, Davies (2023) followed Winstone's (2022) methodology to conduct a corpus linguistics analysis of 50 UK university feedback policy texts and found that feedback within such policies was most frequently operationalized as information being transmitted by teachers to passive recipient students. For example, the most frequent verbs with feedback as the object were *provide* (n = 207), *receive* (n = 92), and *give* (n= 48), with the more learning-focused verb *use* appearing only 21 times (Davies, 2023, p.1215). However, further qualitative thematic analysis did indicate more learning-focused insights than an initial quantitative linguistic analysis. For example, when policy text was analyzed beyond simple Key Word in Context (KWIC) concordance lines and its wider co-text and context were included in the analysis, more learning-focused feedback practices were revealed. To demonstrate this, despite using the transmission-focused verbs *give* and *receive* as objects of feedback, one sampled feedback policy text did so to promote peer feedback and students taking action:

'Students' engagement with feedback thrives when they experience it in a wide range of forms and settings, while gaining practice in acting upon and giving feedback (eg in peer assessments) as well as receiving it' (Davies, 2023, p. 1217)'

Such findings highlight the importance of how language is used when discussing feedback in key strategic or policy texts as such documents are specifically designed to and have the potential to directly impact practice.

## 1. OVERALL EFFECT ON STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

This section synthesizes the evidence on the extent to which feedback and feedback literacy influence student learning outcomes in higher education, and whether effects are generally positive, mixed, null, or context-dependent.

### *Feedback as a powerful influence on learning*

Feedback has the potential to play one of the biggest roles in higher education learners' development (Hattie & Timperley 2007). When feedback is conceptualized as a process through which learners make sense of information and use it to enhance their work or

learning strategies (Carless and Boud, 2018, 1315), the core intended outcome is improvement. In Dawson et al.'s (2018) survey of 323 academic staff and 400 students at two Australian universities, both groups converged on the view that the primary purpose of feedback is improvement, even if faculty and students emphasised somewhat different aspects of effective feedback (design and timing for faculty; usability, detail, consideration, and personalization for students). These findings align with Sadler's (2010) earlier observations, based on several feedback review studies, that "the relationship between [feedback's] form, timing, and effectiveness is complex and variable, with no magic formulas" (p. 536). Overall, the evidence suggests feedback can be strongly positive for student learning outcomes when it is usable, timely, and embedded in cycles of action.

***Effects of peer feedback on learning***

There is general agreement on the benefits of peer feedback, if designed and executed well, for enhancing learning. For the purpose of this report peer feedback can be defined as students evaluating and providing feedback on the academic work of their classmates. With relevance to enhancing feedback literacy, an important phenomenon that will be elaborated upon in sections 1.5 and 1.6, it has been argued that learners need to develop their evaluative judgement, which Tai et al. (2018, p. 1) define as "the capability to make decisions about the quality of work of oneself and others". Joughin, Boud, and Dawson (2019, p. 537) argue that the ability to describe and evaluate a text in relation to a standard and subsequently act upon that appraisal to make improvements is a fundamental skill for students to become self-regulated learners.

To explore whether givers or receivers of peer feedback benefit more in terms of learning, Lundstrom and Baker (2009) conducted a study comprising 91 undergraduate students of varying nationalities in America. The control group received peer feedback on their written essays, whereas the experimental group provided peer feedback on their peers' writing but did not receive any feedback. Pre and post-test timed essays were rated by seven experienced teachers. Results showed that givers of peer feedback benefited more than receivers, with effects particularly strong for beginner and intermediate level students who had recently enrolled at the sampled US university. In contrast, Huisman et al. (2018), in a similar study with 83 undergraduate students

(although 93% were female) in The Netherlands, found that both peer feedback givers and receivers improved their draft essays to a similar extent. Taken together, these studies suggest that peer feedback is generally associated with positive outcomes for student writing, but that the specific pattern of benefits (for givers versus receivers) may be context-dependent and influenced by learner characteristics.

***Dialogic feedback and learning outcomes***

The feedback research literature has also acknowledged the importance of knowledge co-construction and the negotiation of meaning process. Providing learners with regular opportunities to engage in dialogue about feedback allows them to clarify and question the meaning of teacher (Hill and West, 2020) and peer feedback (Zhu and Carless, 2018; Reddy, et al. 2020; Schillings et al., 2020). Wood's (2022) implementation of a technology-mediated peer feedback process using Google Docs with undergraduate students in South Korea, for example, showed that online dialogic feedback made feedback more useful and actionable, lowered socio-affective barriers, and helped overcome barriers of time and space. While specific outcome measures vary across studies, the weight of evidence indicates that dialogic feedback processes can make feedback more actionable and thus more likely to lead to improvements in students' academic work and their confidence in using feedback.

***Feedback training and outcomes***

Hey Cuningham et al.'s (2021) research demonstrates the importance of feedback training for both learners and teachers. They used insights from the feedback research literature to design an evidence-based academic writing and supervision feedback workshop series for a range of Masters and PhD students and their supervisors. Through pre and post-workshop questionnaires, results showed that students and supervisors were more feedback literate, across several dimensions, after participating in the workshop. For example, skills and experience in providing and responding to effective feedback were improved, and participants felt better able to utilise feedback to achieve expected writing standards. Such findings emphasize that structured training can measurably enhance participants' capacity to use feedback in ways that support academic writing development.

### *Feedback literacy and student learning*

Carless and Boud (2018) define student feedback literacy as "students' understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies" which requires "an understanding of what feedback is and how it can be managed effectively; capacities and dispositions to make productive use of feedback; and appreciation of the roles of teachers and [students] in these processes" (1316). Empirical studies on the development of feedback literacy are still relatively limited (Little et al., 2023), but the available evidence suggests that when students' feedback literacy is intentionally supported – through peer feedback, dialogic processes, and feedback training – they are better able to translate feedback into action, with positive implications for learning outcomes.

### *Teacher feedback literacy and learning outcomes*

Taking the perspective of teachers in the feedback process, Carless and Winstone (2023) define teacher feedback literacy as "the knowledge, expertise and dispositions to design feedback processes in ways which enable student uptake of feedback and seed the development of student feedback literacy" (153). Boud and Dawson's (2021) empirically-derived framework for teacher feedback literacy, based on interviews with 62 teachers who demonstrated high levels of feedback competence, identifies 19scompetences across three levels (macro, meso, micro) that shape how feedback is designed and implemented. While their study focuses on competences rather than direct outcome measures, the implication is that feedback literate teachers are more likely to design assessment and feedback environments that support students' use of feedback, and thus their learning outcomes, at scale.

### *GenAI, feedback, and student learning*

With the rapid development of Generative AI (GenAI) Large Language Models (LLMs), higher education practitioners have been searching for ethical AI applications that can save time and improve student support. According to Bearman et al. (2023), GenAI has the potential to revolutionize feedback practices in higher education. Steiss et al. (2024) compared the quality of 200 human-generated formative feedback texts with 200 ChatGPT (v3.5)-generated formative feedback texts on the same essays, finding that human-generated feedback was better for clarity, accuracy, prioritization, and tone,

while ChatGPT was slightly better at explicitly referencing assessment criteria. Although the study context was high school education with highly trained teachers, the findings nonetheless suggest that human feedback currently retains advantages on dimensions closely tied to learning quality, while GenAI may support certain routine aspects of feedback.

Corbin et al. (2025) propose a conceptual framework that distinguishes between "recognitive" and "extra-recognitive" feedback. Recognitive feedback occurs between human agents who are capable of mutual recognition, whereas extra-recognitive feedback – such as that generated by GenAI – is not. The practical takeaway is that routine feedback tasks such as grammar, formatting, citation, and common error checking can and should be outsourced to AI and produced immediately, saving teachers' and students' time, while more complex, recognitive feedback that acknowledges students' agency and vulnerability remains a uniquely human contribution with significant potential for learning gains.

***Overall pattern of effects***

In summary, the evidence on feedback and feedback literacy is generally positive in terms of student learning outcomes, particularly when feedback is:

- learning-focused and actionable rather than purely information-transmission;
- embedded in peer and dialogic processes that build evaluative judgement;
- supported through systematic feedback training for students and teachers; and
- designed and delivered by feedback literate teachers who can integrate human and GenAI-mediated feedback appropriately.

At the same time, effects are context-dependent, influenced by disciplinary norms, cultural expectations (for example, concerns about face and hierarchy in Chinese contexts), and the quality of educational design.

## 2. MECHANISMS: HOW AND WHY FEEDBACK WORKS (OR FAILS)

This section examines the psychological, pedagogical, and social processes through which feedback and feedback literacy exert their effects.

***Sense-making, agency, and use of information***

Carless and Boud's (2018, 1315) definition of feedback foregrounds learners' sense-making and actual use of information. Conceptualizing feedback in this way shifts attention from the transmission of information to the design of tasks, environments, and support structures that enable students to interpret, evaluate, and act on that information. When students cannot or do not use the information to improve their work or learning strategies, it remains simply as information and does not function as feedback.

***Evaluative judgement and peer feedback***

With relevance to enhancing feedback literacy, learners need to develop their evaluative judgement skills. Peer feedback processes are one mechanism through which evaluative judgement can be cultivated. When students evaluate peers' work, they must apply criteria, distinguish between stronger and weaker performances, and formulate suggestions for improvement. Because learners are often less personally invested in peers' texts, biases such as overconfidence and endowment effects may be reduced, potentially sharpening evaluative judgement (Joughin et al., 2019).

However, the success of peer feedback as a mechanism depends on teacher feedback literacy and careful design. Ladyshewsky (2013) reminds us that for peer feedback to be successful, all teachers involved in the process must first themselves "understand the theory and principles of how to give and receive appropriate feedback, and model this behaviour to learners" (p. 175). Ocampo et al.'s (2024) randomized control experiment with 120 male and 120 female undergraduate students in The Philippines, for example, found that female peer reviewers wrote significantly more peer feedback than males and that trained peer reviewers wrote more positive and suggestive comments, highlighting gender-related patterns and the importance of systematic peer feedback training programs (see Pandero et al., (2016) for peer feedback training guidelines).

***Dialogue, co-construction, and socio-affective processes***

The feedback research literature emphasizes knowledge co-construction and the negotiation of meaning. Dialogic feedback, whether face-to-face or technology-mediated, allows learners to clarify, question, and negotiate the implications of feedback (Zhu and Carless, 2018; Hill and West, 2020; Reddy et al., 2021; Schillings et

al., 2021). Through dialogue, learners can surface misunderstandings, reconcile conflicting interpretations, and explore concrete next steps.

However, in some cultural contexts, socio-affective dynamics can inhibit critical dialogue. For Chinese students studying English courses in China, research has shown that peer feedback comments are often overly positive, to avoid face-threatening behaviour amongst classmates (Davies, 2024; Zhu et al., 2023). This may negatively influence the authenticity and developmental value of such feedback dialogues. Moreover, Chinese learners often hold strong views, based on previous educational experiences, that point towards hierarchical relationships of high-power distance between students and teachers (see Nguyen, Terlouw, and Pilot 2006, p. 4-7 for an excellent explanation). Such expectations can shape how students position themselves in feedback interactions and how comfortable they feel questioning or challenging teacher or peer feedback comments on their work.

***Teacher feedback literacy: design, relational, and pragmatic dimensions***

Carless and Winstone's (2023) teacher feedback literacy framework identifies three key dimensions through which teachers shape feedback mechanisms. Firstly, the design dimension highlights the importance of designing curricula and assessments intentionally so that students understand the purpose of feedback, make evaluative judgments on academic quality, and actually use feedback to improve their future academic work (Boud and Molloy, 2013). Secondly, the relational dimension emphasises the emotional vulnerability students face when engaging with feedback and having their work evaluated. Xu and Carless (2017) argue that feedback needs to be delivered in a supportive and constructive manner but in a way that also provides an honest appraisal of students' academic work. This is supported by Hyland and Hyland (2001) who argue that "sugaring the pill" (i.e. softening feedback criticism through hedging and other mitigation strategies) can lead to English as a Second Language students misunderstanding feedback comments. Finally, the pragmatic dimension suggests that teachers need to effectively manage the many competing functions of feedback and perhaps compromise where necessary. For example, tensions exist between providing useful formative feedback comments, justifying grades awarded, and adhering to institutional quality assurance processes (Carless, 2015). Noon and

Eyre (2000) argue that such conflicting functions of feedback "might contribute to the challenges which have been associated with poor assessment literacy and student satisfaction" (p. 2). A particularly challenging function for DKU faculty is balancing effective feedback comments for student improvement with comments that justify a grade. On this point, Boud and Dawson (2021) argue that feedback comments should not serve to justify grades. Furthermore, Winstone and Boud (2022) critically examine the issues created by the entanglement of assessment and feedback, highlighting that students focusing on grades and feedback comments justifying grades are problematic for learning.

In a welcomed addition to much of the conceptual research that has previously been published on the subject, Table 1 summarizes Boud and Dawson's (2021) empirically-derived teacher literacy framework consisting of 19 competences split into three pragmatic levels based on the scope of responsibility involved:

Macro: program design and development
Meso: course module/unit design and implementation
Micro: feedback practices for individual student assignments

Table 1. Simplified summary of Boud and Dawson's (2021) teacher feedback literacy competency framework

| **Level** | **Category** |
|---|---|
| Macro | Plans feedback strategically |
| | Uses available resources well |
| | Creates authentic feedback-rick environments |
| | Develops student feedback literacy |
| | Develops/coordinates colleagues |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Manages feedback pressures (for self and others) |
| | Improves feedback processes |
| Meso | Maximizes effects of limited opportunities for feedback |
| | Organizes timing, location, sequencing of feedback events |
| | Designs for feedback dialogues and cycles |
| | Constructs and implements tasks and accompanying feedback processes |
| | Frames feedback information in relation to standards and criteria |
| | Manages tensions between feedback and grading |
| | Utilizes technological aids to feedback as appropriate |
| | designs to intentionally prompt student action |
| | Designs feedback processes that involve peers and others |
| Micro | Identifies and responds to student needs |
| | Crafts appropriate inputs to students |
| | Differentiates between varying student needs |

***Recognition, GenAI, and the human dimension***

Corbin et al. (2025) propose a recognition-based framework to clarify the place of GenAI

in feedback processes. They define recognition as "the mutual acknowledgement of agency, vulnerability, and shared humanity between teacher and student" (p. 2). Recognitive feedback is grounded in this mutual recognition, whereas extra-recognitive feedback – such as that generated by GenAI – is not. The mechanism they propose is twofold: extra-recognitive feedback from GenAI can handle routine, procedural, and lower-stakes tasks (grammar, formatting, citation, common errors), creating a low-risk "sandbox" for learners; recognitive human feedback, in turn, can focus on higher-order meaning, disciplinary thinking, and the emotional and identity-related aspects of learning. When these mechanisms are intentionally integrated, GenAI can enhance efficiency and access to formative commentaries, while human teachers concentrate on relationally rich, learning-focused feedback that supports students' development as agents and scholars.

Overall, the mechanisms that appear most consequential for feedback's impact on learning are:

- students' sense-making and evaluative judgement;
- dialogic interaction and co-construction of meaning;
- socio-affective safety and recognition; and
- informed curriculum and assessment design by feedback literate teachers, supported (but not replaced) by GenAI tools.

## 3. CONFIDENCE IN THE EVIDENCE BASE

This section evaluates how robust the research is, with attention to methodological limitations, sample sizes, disciplinary and cultural scope, reliance on self-report, and gaps requiring further investigation. It also situates these issues within the broader realities of educational research.

### *Maturity and scope of feedback literacy research*

To determine the specific current landscape of higher education feedback research, Sun et al.'s (2024) bibliometric study analyzed 1,047 publications from 2012 through 2023 in the Journal of Assessment & Evaluation in HE (the leading peer-reviewed journal in the field of higher education assessment) and found that feedback literacy was one of the frontiers of current higher education research. However, in their scoping review,

Little et al. (2023) argue that as feedback literacy is a relatively new concept, there is still relatively limited research literature to draw upon. Their initial database search identified 445 papers according to the initial search criteria, but after careful scrutiny only 16 papers were empirical studies that clearly discussed outcomes and the development of feedback literacy, suggesting an obvious gap in the literature. Furthermore, of the identified 16 studies, 75% were from within the disciplines of health education (50%) or languages (25%), highlighting a very limited range of educational contexts represented.

Such results raise very serious questions about the transferability and applicability of feedback literacy research findings to different disciplines. For example, if the majority of research has been conducted and published within health education and languages, how likely is it that such findings can be applied to university mathematics or physics courses? This disciplinary concentration means that, while existing empirical studies offer promising insights, claims about feedback literacy must be treated with caution when extrapolated to STEM, social sciences, and other fields that may have very different assessment cultures, task designs, student demographics, and class enrollments.

***Conceptual versus empirical research, and reliance on self-report***

Much of the literature on feedback and feedback literacy is conceptual in nature or based heavily on self-reported data. For example, key frameworks such as Carless and Boud's (2018) student feedback literacy model, Carless and Winstone's (2023) teacher feedback literacy framework, and Boud and Dawson's (2021) teacher feedback literacy competency framework are grounded in expert synthesis, qualitative interviews, and thematic analysis. These provide rich conceptual clarity and practitioner-relevant models, but do not always include rigorous outcome measures or experimental comparisons.

Student dissatisfaction with feedback, as reported by Winstone and Carless (2020), is often drawn from large-scale student satisfaction surveys in Australia, the UK, and Hong Kong, which they acknowledge are "admittedly poorly designed" (p. 5). Such surveys rely on self-report, may conflate overall course satisfaction with feedback experiences, and rarely isolate the effects of specific feedback interventions. Similarly, many studies

on dialogic feedback or technology-mediated feedback (e.g. Wood, 2022; Ducasse and Hill, 2019) use self-reported questionnaires and interviews to capture students' perceptions of usefulness, engagement, or emotional responses, with more limited use of objective performance outcomes or longitudinal designs.

At the same time, studies that do include more objective measures – such as Lundstrom and Baker's (2009) pre/post essay ratings by multiple teachers, or Steiss et al.'s (2024) comparison of human and ChatGPT feedback quality – are often constrained to specific institutional and demographic contexts. Therefore, the generalizability of their findings beyond those settings, and to EMI Sino-foreign joint-venture contexts like DKU, remains unclear and should be treated with caution.

***Cultural and contextual variation***

A recurring theme in the literature is the culturally and contextually contingent nature of feedback practices. For example, research on Chinese learners (Davies, 2024; Zhu et al., 2023) identifies tendencies towards overly positive peer feedback to avoid face-threatening behaviour, and strong expectations of hierarchical teacher-student relations (Nguyen et al., 2006). These cultural dynamics may moderate the effectiveness of peer and dialogic feedback approaches that were originally developed and tested in more individualistic, low power-distance educational environments (e.g. The UK and Australia) although Hong Kong also has a strong presence within the leading feedback research literature.

Similarly, Winstone's (2022) analysis of 134 UK universities' strategic and TEF-related documents, and Davies' (2023) analysis of UK feedback policy texts, highlight that institutional policy language often remains transmission-focused even when research discourse has shifted, raising questions about the extent to which conceptual advances have translated into practice on the ground.

***Realities of educational research***

These limitations should be understood in the broader context of education research. Compared to fields such as medicine or experimental psychology, educational studies often work with smaller samples, face practical and ethical challenges to randomization and control, rely heavily on naturally occurring classes and programs,

and must account for the complexity of real-world learning environments. Replication studies are limited, interventions are embedded in diverse curricula and institutional cultures, and outcomes are influenced by multiple interacting variables (teacher expertise, institutional policy, student demographics, language background, etc.). As a result, it is challenging to make strong causal claims or to generalize findings across institutions and cultural contexts.

Nevertheless, transparent acknowledgement of these constraints strengthens rather than weakens the credibility of the field. The converging evidence from conceptual work, qualitative studies, practitioner accounts, and the smaller pool of empirical outcome-focused research suggest feedback is most powerful when it is designed as an interactive, learning-focused process, and when students and teachers develop the literacies needed to use feedback productively.

***Key gaps and directions for further research***

The literature reviewed in this report points to several important gaps:

- A need for more rigorous empirical studies on feedback literacy interventions, with clearer outcome measures and, where possible, comparison or control groups (Little et al., 2023).
- Much broader disciplinary representation beyond health education and languages, including STEM, social sciences, and interdisciplinary liberal arts programs.
- Greater attention to cultural variation and to contexts such as EMI Sino-foreign joint-venture universities, where language, culture, and institutional structures intersect in distinctive ways (Davies, 2024; Ou & Gu (2021), Zhu et al., 2023).
- More research on how teacher feedback literacy competences (Boud and Dawson, 2021; Carless and Winstone, 2023) can be cultivated in practice through professional development, workload and policy reforms, and institutional support structures.
- Systematic investigation of how GenAI tools interact with human feedback, particularly in higher education contexts, and how recognition-based

frameworks (Corbin et al., 2025) can be operationalized without undermining academic integrity or human relationships.

For DKU and similar institutions, these gaps suggest both caution and opportunity: while the evidence base remains constrained, there is sufficient converging insight to justify carefully designed local experimentation, accompanied by robust evaluation and scholarly dissemination.

## 4. ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DKU FACULTY

Drawing on the preceding sections, this final section proposes concrete steps that DKU instructors can take, the kinds of support and training that may be needed, and contexts where particular approaches may be most applicable.

### *Design curricula and assessment for feedback literacy*

According to Carless and Winstone's (2023) definition, feedback literate teachers design their assessments intentionally in ways that emphasize feedback opportunities from various sources that enhance their learners' own feedback literacy. Boud and Dawson's (2021) framework further underscores the need for macro, meso, and micro-level competences. For DKU faculty, this suggests the following design-oriented actions:

- At program (macro) level:
  - – Where possible, plan feedback strategically across courses so that students encounter a coherent progression of feedback practices (e.g. early formative tasks, structured peer review, scaffolded self-assessment) rather than isolated, ad hoc feedback events.
  - – Create authentic feedback-rich environments in which feedback from teachers, peers, self, and GenAI is aligned with program learning outcomes and disciplinary practices.
  - – Coordinate with colleagues to ensure that key competences (e.g. use of rubrics, engagement with feedback comments, dialogic feedback norms) are reinforced across courses.
- At course (meso) level:

– Maximize the effects of limited opportunities for feedback by organizing the timing, location, and sequencing of feedback events so that students have time and reason to act on comments (Boud and Molloy, 2013; Boud and Dawson, 2021). For example, plan and design for feedback at the most useful stage of an assignment, e.g. feedback on a full draft when students have the opportunity to revise, rather than on the final submission at the end of a course.
– Design tasks with built-in feedback cycles (draft–feedback–revision) and opportunities for dialogue (e.g. small-group feedback discussions, clarification sessions, office hours framed as feedback consultations).
– Frame feedback information in relation to standards and criteria, and make explicit the links between feedback, grading, and future work to manage tensions and promote transparency.
– Intentionally prompt student action (e.g. requiring short feedback response plans, revision memos, tracked changes, or reflective commentaries that describe how feedback has been used).

• At assignment (micro) level:

– Identify and respond to diverse student needs, including language proficiency and familiarity with academic genres in an EMI context.
– Craft comments that are usable, detailed, considerate, and personalized (Dawson et al., 2018), while also honest and anchored in clear criteria (Hyland and Hyland, 2001; Xu and Carless, 2017).
– Differentiate feedback for students who require more foundational guidance versus those ready for more advanced, disciplinary-specific critique.

- Encourage dialogue and feedback customization by requiring students to complete an interactive feedback cover sheet upon submission where they can make specific feedback requests.

***Embed peer feedback and dialogic processes in culturally sensitive ways***

The research reviewed suggests that peer feedback and dialogue can significantly enhance evaluative judgement and feedback literacy (Tai et al., 2018; Joughin et al., 2019; Zhu and Carless, 2018; Reddy et al., 2021; Schillings et al., 2021), but also that

these practices need careful scaffolding, particularly in Chinese contexts where concerns about face and hierarchy are salient (Davies, 2024; Zhu et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2006).

For DKU's liberal arts, interdisciplinary, EMI environment, faculty might:

- Introduce peer feedback gradually, starting with low-stakes tasks and clearly framed purposes (e.g. focusing on idea development or clarity of structure rather than error correction alone).
- Provide exemplars and model how to give specific, constructive, and balanced feedback, possibly co-creating feedback sentence stems or comment banks with students (Ladyshewsky, 2013; Gielen and De Wever, 2015).
- Use structured protocols for peer review (e.g. guided questions tied to rubric criteria) to support less experienced students and reduce anxiety.
- Incorporate small-group or pair-based feedback discussions, where students can negotiate meaning, ask clarification questions, and reflect on how feedback will inform their revisions (Zhu and Carless, 2018; Hill and West, 2020).
- Acknowledge and discuss cultural norms around face, hierarchy, and critique, making it explicit that carefully framed critical feedback is a form of academic care and collegiality.
- Consider discipline- and cohort-specific adaptations: for example, STEM courses may emphasise feedback on problem-solving processes and reasoning, while humanities and social science courses might foreground argumentation, evidence use, and voice.

***Provide feedback training and workshops for students and faculty***

Hey Cuningham et al.'s (2021) workshop series for Masters and PhD students and supervisors showed that both groups became more feedback literate and felt better able to use feedback to meet writing standards. Given DKU's commitment to high levels of academic support, similar initiatives could be valuable:

- For students (undergraduate and graduate):
  - Offer co-curricular workshops on "using feedback effectively", drawing on Carless and Boud's (2018) feedback literacy dimensions (understanding,

capacities, dispositions).

– Integrate short, course-embedded activities on interpreting rubrics, decoding feedback comments, and planning revisions, particularly in writing- and project-intensive courses.

– Encourage students to bring feedback from multiple courses into Writing and Language Studio consultations or other support services, so they can see patterns and develop strategic responses.

• For faculty and teaching assistants:

– Develop professional development sessions through the Center for Teaching and Learning that introduce key concepts (learning-focused feedback, feedback literacy, evaluative judgement), share DKU-specific examples, and invite participants to analyse and redesign their own feedback practices.

– Provide space for cross-disciplinary sharing of feedback strategies, allowing instructors from different divisions to adapt ideas to their own contexts.

– Ensure that those involved in assessment and feedback policy at DKU are familiar with current feedback research to avoid unintentionally promoting transmission-focused practices in local guidelines and documents as revealed by Davies (2023) within UK higher education contexts.

***Use GenAI strategically while safeguarding human recognition***

Drawing on Bearman et al. (2023), Steiss et al. (2024), and Corbin et al. (2025), DKU faculty can adopt a principled approach to GenAI in feedback:

• Use GenAI for extra-recognitive, routine tasks:

– Grammar, spelling, and punctuation suggestions;

– Formatting and citation checks;

– Identification of common surface-level issues in drafts.

• Position GenAI as a “pre-feedback” or “sandbox” environment:

– Encourage students to use GenAI to get preliminary comments on drafts, summaries of their own writing, or suggestions for questions to ask their instructor about feedback.

– Make explicit that GenAI feedback is not a substitute for teacher or peer judgement, but a tool to prepare students to use human feedback more productively.

• Reserve recognitive feedback for human interactions:

– Focus teacher feedback time on higher-order issues (argumentation, disciplinary thinking, methodological reasoning, voice, ethical considerations) and on recognizing students' efforts and vulnerabilities.
– Use feedback dialogues (in class, online, or in office hours) to enact recognition, building trusting relationships that support risk-taking and academic/professional growth (Corbin et al., 2025).

***Targeted application to DKU contexts***

The approaches outlined above are likely to be particularly applicable in:

• Writing- and project-intensive courses across the curriculum, where iterative drafts and revisions are already common.
• First-year foundation and gateway courses, where students are building foundational feedback literacy in an EMI Sino-foreign context.
• Capstone, thesis, and research project modules, where supervisor–student feedback relationships play a central role (Hey Cuningham et al., 2021).
• Courses enrolling diverse cohorts (e.g. international and domestic students; students from different disciplinary backgrounds) where explicit attention to cultural and disciplinary feedback norms can support equity and inclusion.

In all these contexts, the goal is not simply to "improve feedback" as a discrete practice, but to design ecosystems of support that combine peer processes, teacher modelling, training, and sensitivity to the cultural and interpersonal dimensions of feedback.

## CONCLUSION

This report has reviewed key literature related to higher education feedback practice in an attempt to shed light on current insights and approaches for improving practice. It is clear that understandings of feedback have evolved over time leading to a paradigm shift in thinking and practice on the subject. Current feedback practices should involve

learners as agentic sense-makers and encourage feedback users to take action to improve their academic work or learning habits. Furthermore, the importance of peer feedback, dialogue, and feedback training have been stressed. Of most interest to higher education assessment and feedback scholars is the phenomenon of feedback literacy, which can be viewed from the perspective of students and teachers. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of teachers in their design of pedagogy, curricula, and assessments to create the ideal conditions for their learners to become more feedback literate and benefit more from feedback to enhance learning.

This report has organized existing research around four focal areas: the overall effect of feedback and feedback literacy on student learning outcomes; the mechanisms through which feedback operates; the strength and limitations of the current evidence base; and actionable recommendations for DKU faculty. It has explored the characteristics of feedback literate teachers, presented empirically-derived strategies for developing students' feedback literacy, and discussed the place of GenAI within feedback processes. It has also acknowledged gaps in the literature in that much research has been conceptual in nature and the majority of empirical research consists of insights from self-reported interview or survey data. Furthermore, a limited range of academic disciplines and demographics of student and teacher populations have been presented within the literature. Therefore, future research on the topic of higher education feedback should consider gathering data from a wider range of higher education contexts and cultures and on more clearly establishing the specific outcomes of particular feedback interventions through the use of control group and experimental group comparisons. For institutions such as Duke Kunshan University, there is both a responsibility and an opportunity to contribute to this evolving evidence base by designing, evaluating, and sharing contextually grounded feedback innovations that enhance student learning across disciplines.

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