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## **A pilot study on conditions under which assessment of and feedback on written assignments affect learning**

**Μια πιλοτική έρευνα των προϋποθέσεων υπό τις οποίες η αξιολόγηση και η ανατροφοδότηση των γραπτών εργασιών επηρεάζουν τη μάθηση**

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*Assessment plays a crucial role in Distance Education, as it helps tutors perform better, design strategies, set priorities and monitor students' progress through written assignments and the feedback tutors send their students. Frequent assignments constitute the cornerstone of Distance Education and establish a dialogue between students and tutors, when tutors guide the students to do research, produce quality work and become autonomous by improving their learning strategies and writing skills through constructive comments. Feedback has gained ground in Distance Education because of its influence on learning and progress, as it is related to students' expectations with regard to explanations, justifications, reflection, critical thinking, motivation and suggestions for improvement. The present pilot study, conducted at the Postgraduate Programme of Teaching English as a Foreign/International Language of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) during the academic year 2015-2016, is trying to shed light on the unexplored impact of assessment and feedback on students' learning, skills development and metacognition. The study is based on a 'set of conditions' proposed by Gibbs & Simpson (2005), under which assessment and feedback support and affect learning. The research tool is a 73-item questionnaire consisting of 14 groups of questions, built upon these conditions. The results reveal that effective, detailed, regular and forward-looking feedback significantly relates to students' motivation, understanding and learning. They also set the basis for further research and changes in the feedback form HOU students receive.*



*Η αξιολόγηση παίζει καθοριστικό ρόλο στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση, καθώς βοηθά τους διδάσκοντες και τους φοιτητές να αποδίδουν καλύτερα, να σχεδιάζουν στρατηγικές, να θέτουν προτεραιότητες και να παρακολουθούν την πρόοδο των φοιτητών μέσω των γραπτών εργασιών και της ανατροφοδότησης. Οι συχνές εργασίες αποτελούν τον ακρογωνιαίο λίθο της εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευσης και καθιερώνουν έναν διάλογο μεταξύ*

φοιτητών και διδασκόντων, όταν οι δεύτεροι καθοδηγούν τους πρώτους στην έρευνα, την ποιοτική εργασία και την αυτονομία, συμβάλλοντας στη βελτίωση των στρατηγικών μάθησης και των δεξιοτήτων γραπτού λόγου μέσω εποικοδομητικών σχολίων. Η ανατροφοδότηση κατακτά έδαφος στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση λόγω της επίδρασής της στη μάθηση και την πρόοδο, καθώς σχετίζεται με τις προσδοκίες των φοιτητών σχετικά με εξηγήσεις, αιτιολογήσεις, αναστοχασμό και κριτική σκέψη, δημιουργία κινήτρων και προτάσεις βελτίωσης. Η παρούσα πιλοτική μελέτη, η οποία εκπονήθηκε στο Μεταπτυχιακό Πρόγραμμα Διδασκαλίας της Αγγλικής ως Ξένης/Διεθνούς Γλώσσας του Ελληνικού Ανοικτού Πανεπιστημίου (ΕΑΠ) κατά το ακαδημαϊκό έτος 2015-2016, επιχειρεί να διερευνήσει τον αντίκτυπο της αξιολόγησης και της ανατροφοδότησης στη μάθηση, την ανάπτυξη δεξιοτήτων και τη μεταγνώση. Η μελέτη βασίζεται σε ένα σύνολο προϋποθέσεων που προτάθηκαν από τους Gibbs και Simpson (2005), σύμφωνα με τις οποίες η αξιολόγηση και η ανατροφοδότηση στηρίζουν και επηρεάζουν τη μάθηση. Το ερευνητικό εργαλείο που χρησιμοποιήθηκε είναι ένα ερωτηματολόγιο 73 ερωτήσεων, αποτελούμενο από 14 ομάδες ερωτήσεων, οι οποίες βασίζονται σε αυτές τις προϋποθέσεις. Τα αποτελέσματα αποκαλύπτουν ότι η αποτελεσματική, λεπτομερής, τακτική και διαμορφωτική ανατροφοδότηση σχετίζεται σημαντικά με τα κίνητρα, την κατανόηση και τη μάθηση των φοιτητών. Θέτουν επίσης τη βάση για περαιτέρω έρευνα και διαφοροποιήσεις στο έντυπο ανατροφοδότησης που λαμβάνουν οι φοιτητές του ΕΑΠ.

**Key words:** Distance learning, formative assessment, written assignments, tutor's feedback

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## 1. Introduction

Distance education and online learning have been clearly demonstrated to be an effective alternative to traditional classroom learning (Siemens *et al.*, 2015, p.165), with research findings reporting “no significant difference” in student learning associated with the course setting (Dominguez & Ridley, 1999). From the 1970s to the 1990s, research in distance education was pluralistic and focused on areas such as philosophy and theory, students' context and motivation, case studies, communication between tutors and students, organization and evaluation of distance programmes (Holmberg, 1987, in Giosos *et al.*, 2008, p.52) which add to knowledge, attitudes and skills by means of the use of advanced technology and quality educational material (Peters, 1971). According to Bers (1999), distance education not only has profound effects on the roles, necessary skills, relationships, and ways of doing business for institutional researchers but also involves a number of challenges regarding the assessment of student learning outcomes. Dominguez & Ridley (1999) propose a shift in distance education research first, by removing the emphasis from distance education students and placing it on the course itself and, second, by including distance education students' subsequent performance in other classes and their preparation for further study. The latter, namely student performance and preparation for further study, depend to a great extent on the form of assessment and the feedback distance education students receive.

## 2. Assessment and feedback in Distance Education: Theoretical background

Distance education is structured on specific components: the educational material, methodology, communication, support and assessment (Mouzakis, 2006, p. 13). Assessment

has an important role to play in distance education, as, according to Rogers (1999), it contributes to tutors' performance, design of strategies and priorities and monitoring of progress. It is classified into external, through exams, and internal, through assignments (Jumani *et al.*, 2011). Frequent assignments constitute the cornerstone of distance education, establish a dialogue between students and tutors, and render distance education effective (Chander, 1991, in Jumani *et al.*, 2011) when, among other things, tutors guide students in producing quality assignments on their own and provide constructive and supportive comments to facilitate students' improvement of their assignment writing skills (Jumani *et al.*, 2011; Thanopoulou, 2009, p.151). Assisting learning and teaching strategies, such as negotiating meanings and valuing meaningful activity over correct answers, by employing constructivist theories can be particularly challenging in a distance education context and necessary in diminishing the distance between tutors and students (Schulze, 2009).

Feedback, as a form of communication between tutors and students, is another parameter that gains momentum with the foundation of the Open University in England (Howard, 1987) because of its influence on learning and progress (Race, 1999). Feedback is defined as "information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way" (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 4), or "information about the gap between actual and reference levels is considered as feedback only when it is used to alter the gap" (Sadler, 1989, p. 121, in Walker, 2009, p.3). The tutor's role is, therefore, to help students reduce that gap.

The significance of feedback on assignments, albeit under-researched in higher education (Weaver, 2006), is highlighted by several authors (Brown, 2007; Cole *et al.*, 1986; Price, 1997) especially in the context of students' expectations with regard to explanations, justifications, reflection, critical thinking and suggestions for improvement.

Apart from what the comments in assignments offer, Brown and Glover (2006) mention six categories of comments, including content, skills development, motivation, de-motivation, future study and resources the students could use (Walker, 2009, p.5). Walker (2009) examines what sorts of comments students find usable, in the sense that students could in fact use them either to address their misconceptions or to improve their work in the future, finding that most comments fall within the category of content, which could be usable if accompanied by explanations on corrections. Skills development comments could also be usable for future study, while motivating comments result in encouragement. As we will see below, the findings of the present study partly correlate with this as further reading does not seem to be encouraged much in tutors' comments.

All these issues hinge on the idea of supportive feedback. Wion (2008) provides a definition of supportive feedback and describes two components of it, the style and the type. According to Wion's study, feedback is supportive when it supports both the learner and the learning process, provides the learners with opportunities to reflect on their work in affective, cognitive, developmental, metacognitive, motivational, psychomotor and social perspectives as well as with opportunities to develop themselves towards their personal training goals. Three styles of communication between the tutor and the student are mentioned: the declarative, the reiterative and the interrogative one, each of which has a different function and affects the student in a different way. As for the type of feedback, the distinction includes: affective feedback, which could lead to low or high performance, cognitive feedback, which gives the student corrective information, developmental feedback, which could improve the student's skills and lead to further growth, metacognitive

feedback, which involves critical thinking, self-reflection and metacognition, motivational feedback, which provides encouragement, self-confidence and self-competency, and social feedback, which benefits students through their interaction with the tutors, peers, academic advisors and so on.

Hyland (2001) also stresses the significance of feedback, albeit unexplored, in opening and maintaining a dialogue between tutors and students in the distance learning context. By reporting on several authors (Cole *et al.*, 1986; Jarvis, 1978, Rice *et al.*, 1994; Roberts; 1996; White, 1994, 1995, 1997), she focuses on items essential for marking and feedback in distance education: marking as a means of assessment, communicating knowledge and facilitating learning; a supportive and encouraging approach adopted by tutors giving explanations for the grades, stressing strengths and offering constructive criticism; detailed facilitative comments which could prove most useful and help students develop metacognitive strategies.

Investigating students' and tutors' perceptions of useful feedback in the distance language learning context, Hyland (2001) also concludes that most feedback is related to the content of the assignment and less on other variables, such as organization, presentation and learning strategies, whereas the purpose of feedback should be not only for tutors to correct content errors but also to provide long comments on problematic areas, support and encouragement, and promote autonomous learning. The need for tutor training in providing effective feedback also emerges from the present research, as will be shown later. Other issues taken into consideration are the extent to which the nature of marking guides influences the comments tutors provide as well as the extent to which tutors offer comments which might not be usable (see Walker, 2009).

It is evident, therefore, that both assessment and feedback have been the object of research because of their significant role in students' learning and progress as well as skills development.

### **3. The research background**

The present research is based on factors and a set of conditions proposed by Gibbs & Simpson (2005), under which assessment and feedback support and affect learning, namely the dominant influence of assessment, the decline in formative assessment, the effectiveness of feedback and the influence of feedback on learning, which are going to be discussed below.

#### **3.1. The dominant influence of assessment**

It has been argued that what influences students most is not teaching but assessment and assessment procedures, which over the years have made students more strategic so that they orient their effort into what counts or what they think counts in assessment (Miller & Parlett, 1974). Miller & Parlett (1974, in Gibbs & Simpson, 2005, p.5) distinguish students into three types as regards the attention they pay to the tutor's cues on the examination content: the 'cue seekers', the 'cue conscious' and the 'cue deaf'. It has also been supported (Bridges *et al.*, 2002; Chansarkar & Raut-Roy, 1987; Gibbs & Lucas, 1997) that modules with coursework assignments give students higher marks than modules with 100% examinations, and are not less valid, as they predict long-term learning of course content and subsequent

performance at work. Moreover, students prefer assignments to exams for reasons of fairness, measurement of a greater range of abilities and organization of work patterns.

### **3.2. The decline in formative assessment**

As reported by Gibbs & Simpson (2005), the number of assignments and, consequently, the feedback received by students has declined over the years in conventional institutions in England while at Open University the feedback received is fifty times as much in a degree programme as at conventional universities. Great emphasis is also placed on frequent assignments, timely, comprehensive and quality feedback and tutor training, since it is acknowledged that feedback constitutes the main form of interaction between students and tutors as well as students' guidance into tackling assignments and learning.

### **3.3. The effectiveness of feedback**

As regards the effectiveness of feedback, there has been a controversy between tutors and students (Hounsell, 1987; Lea & Street, 1998; Maclellan, 2001) over the way in which feedback helps students understand and learn and prompts discussion with the tutor. In some cases, feedback is just thrown away if the mark is disliked or perceived as indicating the student's merit in relation to others (norm-referenced). This leads to a discussion (Black & William, 1998) of the absence of an overall mark so that feedback is studied more carefully. Despite the opposed views, feedback remains a significant factor in focusing on important aspects of the course material, assisting learning, developing students' skills and increasing mastery.

### **3.4. The influence of feedback on learning**

Feedback is beneficial in the sense that it provides students with opportunities to perform, receive suggestions for improvement, reflect on their learning, assess themselves and correct errors (Bruner, 1974; Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

An attempt to reveal the way assessment can support learning is made by Gibbs & Simpson (2005, p.12) by offering a set of 10 'conditions' in two categories of influence: "the influence of the design of assessment systems and assignments on how much students study, what they study and on the quality of their engagement, and the influence of feedback on learning."

More specifically, the first condition, "sufficient assessed tasks are provided for students to capture sufficient study time" is related to the time students allocate themselves to learn. However, there is evidence that students' effort is associated with motivation, not the time they spend studying (Kember *et al.*, 1996).

The second condition, "these tasks are engaged with by students, orienting them to allocate appropriate amounts of time and effort to the most important aspects of the course", is related to the quality of effort which is involved throughout the course, with frequent assignments so that intensive studying just before the final exam is avoided.

The third condition, "tackling the assessed task engages students in productive learning activity of an appropriate kind" connects assignments and group projects to helpful and appropriate learning activity, effective study strategies, quality learning processes and

constructive argumentation despite the fact that students sometimes treat assignments as a way to maximize their marks.

The fourth condition, “sufficient feedback is provided, both often enough and in enough detail” refers to formative assessment and focuses on regular, frequent, prompt and small pieces of feedback to support learning.

The fifth condition, “the feedback focuses on students’ performance, on their learning and on actions under the students control, rather than on the students themselves and on their characteristic”, supports grades being accompanied by feedback related to students’ actions so as to encourage learning, and not to their personality, which is demotivating and damages students’ self-efficacy, and, as a result, their effort and persistence (Schunk, 1984).

The sixth condition, “the feedback is timely in that it is received by students while it still matters to them and in time for them to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance”, stresses the significance of timely feedback before students move on to further content, and feedback is then irrelevant or unlikely to foster additional learning.

The seventh condition, “feedback is appropriate to the purpose of the assignment and to its criteria for success”, relates feedback to the goals (high- or low-level) set for the assignment. Feedback serves a number of functions, such as correcting errors, developing understanding, generating learning, promoting metacognition and the development of generic skills, motivating and encouraging students for further studying. In that sense, students need to know the criteria and standards set in order to understand completely why they have got a specific grade and what they should have done to get a higher one. At this point, self- and peer-assessment through checklists could be valuable and enhance reliability of marks, while sharing, group discussion and evaluation of good practices could be an exemplar and set high-level goals.

The eighth condition, “feedback is appropriate, in relation to students’ understanding of what they are supposed to be doing”, is related to the clarity of tasks set in the assignments so that the tasks are fully comprehensible to students and reveal learning not as mere memorization of information but as understanding and “a change in personal reality” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005, p. 22). Thus, feedback has to be sensitive to what kind of writing students are expected to produce.

The ninth condition, “feedback is received and attended to”, relates feedback to students’ paying attention to the comments and not only having a look at the mark. Some steps, including self-assessment, two-stage assignments, and so on, are reported by Gibbs & Simpson (2005, p. 24) to engage students with feedback.

The tenth condition, “feedback is acted upon by the student”, concerns the impact of feedback on future learning. Whether or not feedback helps students’ metacognition and monitoring of their performance depends on several variables, such as timeliness, specificity, contextuality, encouragement and follow-up action (Gibbs & Simpson 2005, p. 25).

The aforementioned conditions could be used as a checklist by tutors in order to test and review the effectiveness of their assessment standards or expanded into a set of questions, as in the case of the present research, to further elaborate on the assessment system used and make appropriate changes in the future.

## 4. The research context

### 4.1. The research objectives

At the Hellenic Open University, written assignments are marked and commented on by part-time tutors by following pre-defined marking guidelines and completing a standard cover sheet which is uploaded on the programme platform with the marked assignment and in-text comments. The present study aimed to elucidate the extent to which the aforementioned conditions are satisfied in the assessment procedure followed at the specific University.

The study was conducted during the academic year 2015-2016 at the Hellenic Open University by e-mailing the questionnaire directly to students attending the post-graduate programme “The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language” and to tutors in order for them to forward the questionnaire to their students. All in all, 30 questionnaires were collected.

### 4.2. The participants

Despite the effort to include students from other modules, there was not much response, so most participants (75%) were students recently attending the module of testing and assessment in language learning. All the participants were graduates of the English Department, mostly of the University of Athens. Most of them were 31-40 (34.5%) or 41-50 (34.5%) years old. They lived in different parts of Greece, the majority in Athens (56.5%). The majority also worked for the public sector (57.1%) and the rest (42.9%) for the private sector. Almost eight out of ten had chosen to study at the Hellenic Open University for professional growth, i.e. teacher development. Other reasons included specialization, relating studies to work and getting a post-graduate degree. Their expectations included: developing teaching skills, approaches and effectiveness (52.4%), designing communicative tests (23.8%), learning about methods of assessment (9.5%); using technology, getting personal development and pleasure (4.8% each). As for their goals, they related to applying methods of assessment to practice and constructing valid tests (30%), developing teaching skills and materials (25%), life-long learning (25%), enhancing students’ interest, doing further research, working abroad or running their own school (5% each).

### 4.3. Description of the research tool

The research tool is a 73-item (5-point Likert scale) questionnaire, built upon the conditions and the theoretical framework described above. It consists of 14 groups of questions, i.e., the aforementioned theoretical factors (the dominant influence of assessment, the decline of formative assessment, the effectiveness of feedback, the influence of feedback on learning) and the ten conditions of assessment (see sections 3.1-3.4). Through the research tool an attempt is made to explore students’ attitude towards written assignments and the feedback they receive.

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.810	73

Figure 1. Reliability Statistics

The reliability of the research tool was tested and found to be considerably high (Fig. 1).

The first group of questions concerns the dominant influence of assessment (subsection 3.1) and consists of seven questions (1-7) which explore students' attitude towards assignments compared with exams in terms of marks, fairness, range of abilities, work organization, validity and prediction of long-term learning of the module.

The second group relates to the decline in formative assessment, consists of five questions (8-12) and explores what kind of feedback would be helpful to the students, based on the theory that regular, formative assignments and frequent and detailed feedback are central to student learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005, p. 8).

The third group concerns the effectiveness of feedback, explores students' opinion of the significance of marks and feedback and consists of eight questions (13-20). The fourth and fifth groups refer to conditions 1 and 2, i.e. effort and time allocated to assignments, with three (21-23) and two (24-25) questions respectively. The sixth group refers to condition 3 and consists of four questions (26-29), which relate assignments to learning. The seventh group concerns the influence of feedback on learning with three questions (30-32). The eighth group refers to condition 4, regularity and detail of the feedback received, with three questions (33-35), while the ninth group deals with condition 5, students' errors, with three questions (36-38). The tenth group, consisting of two questions (39-40), relates to condition 6, timely feedback, and the eleventh group refers to condition 7, i.e. the relation of the feedback to the goals set in the assignment, and includes twelve questions (41-52). The twelfth group refers to condition 8, including four questions (53-56), which relate feedback to students' understanding.

The thirteenth group relates to condition 9, students' attention to the feedback comments, and includes six questions (57-62), and finally, the fourteenth group refers to condition 10, the impact of feedback on future learning, and includes eleven questions (63-73).

## 5. The research results

The research results are clustered in tables 1-9 (valid percent, analyzed by the statistical programme SPSS) and discussed below along the lines of the aforementioned groups of questions.

As regards the first group of questions (Table 1), which contrasts assignments to final exams, almost half of the participants state that their marks in the assignments were higher than in the final exams. More than six out of ten think that assignments are fairer than exams, and almost all of them are of the opinion that assignments measure a greater range of abilities than exams and allow them to organize work to a greater extent than exams. About eight out of ten students prefer half or more of their marks to come from assignments, as they believe in their validity and prediction value with regard to long-term learning of the module content.

As regards what would be helpful to students (Table 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> group), 80% of the students think that the personalized and timely feedback they receive on assignments helps them cope with the final exams, and fewer than half of them need more detailed feedback. Almost nine out of ten believe the oral feedback they get from the tutor at the meetings offers them

guidance for the assignments, while six out of ten think that problem sheets and group work activities done at the meetings help them cope with the assignments.

	Questions	totally agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	totally disagree
1	I got higher marks in the assignments than in the exams.	17.2	27.6	34.5	20.7	
2	I think assignments are fairer than exams.	43.3	20.0	23.3	10.0	3.3
3	I think assignments measure a greater range of abilities than exams.	43.3	50.0	6.7		
4	I think assignments allow me to organize my work to a greater extent than exams.	46.7	50.0	3.3		
5	I prefer half or more of my marks to come from assignments.	70.0	16.7	13.3		
6	I think that assignments are a valid form of assessment.	56.7	33.3	10.0		
7	I think that assignments are a better predictor of long-term learning of the module content than exams are.	50.0	33.3	16.7		

Table 1: Assignments compared to exams

	Questions	totally agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	totally disagree
8	The personalized feedback I receive on assignments helps me cope with the final exams.	20.0	60.0	13.3	3.3	3.3
9	I need more detailed feedback.	16.7	30.0	20.0	33.3	
10	Problem sheets and group work activities done at the meetings help me cope with the assignments.	20.0	40.0	36.7	3.3	
11	Oral feedback I get from the tutor at the meetings offers me guidance for the assignments.	55.2	34.5	10.3		
12	The feedback I get is timely.	23.3	56.7	16.7	3.3	

Table 2: Feedback and learning

A far as the significance of feedback (Table 3, 3<sup>rd</sup> group) is concerned, all the participating students feel that the feedback they get from the tutor is really important, prompts discussion with the tutor (75%), generally supports learning and helps them understand and learn (almost 90%). It also seems that almost all students pay attention to the feedback they get rather than the grade and they would not be satisfied with only a general feedback report (almost 80%). The grade does not seem to be norm-referenced (about 40%), nor is it related to students' self-efficacy.

	Questions	totally agree	agree	neither agree nor	disagree	totally disagree
13	I think the tutor writing comments on assignments is important.	70.0	30.0			
14	I am satisfied with only a general feedback report.	3.4	13.8	3.4	62.1	17.2
15	The feedback I receive on assignments is helpful in understanding and learning.	56.7	36.7	6.7		
16	The feedback prompts discussion with the tutor.	34.5	41.4	24.1		
17	I usually have a look at the mark and throw the feedback away.		3.4		24.1	72.4
18	The grade indicates where I stand in relation to others.	3.3	30.0	23.3	26.7	16.7
19	A poor grade damages my self-efficacy.	6.7	23.3	43.3	23.3	3.3
20	The feedback provided is effective in supporting learning.	43.3	46.7	3.3	3.3	3.3

Table 3: Effectiveness of feedback

The factors that contribute to the effort allocated to assignments (4<sup>th</sup> group, see Table 4) are motivation and employment (70%), and it is not affected by peer-embarrassment, as experience reveals. Most students (about 70%) distribute their time and study effort (5<sup>th</sup> group) across the course and avoid intensive studying before the assignment deadline.

	Questions	totally agree	agree	neither agree nor	disagree	totally disagree
21	The effort and time I allocate to assignments depend on motivation.	16.7	53.3	20.0	10.0	
22	My employment impedes me from investing enough time in studying.	26.7	43.3	20.0	10.0	
23	My effort is affected by the potential embarrassment of the poor quality of my work being seen by peer students.		6.7	33.3	40.0	20.0
24	I distribute my time and study effort across the course (e.g. on a weekly basis).	20.0	50.0	23.3	3.3	3.3
25	I do only intensive studying for a week or two immediately prior to the assignment deadline.		16.7	16.7	33.3	33.3

Table 4: Effort and time allocated to assignments

From the responses obtained, it seems that assignments (Table 5, 6<sup>th</sup> group) are primarily connected to learning (over 90%), give students the opportunity to use the discourse of the discipline, and provide a framework for the learning activities of “reading around” and “constructing arguments” (see Gibbs & Simpson, 2005, p. 15) to a large extent (80%). Only half of the participant students tackle them as activities to maximize their marks.

Not only assignments but also feedback (Table 6) is related to learning (7<sup>th</sup> group), since it includes suggestions for improvement, gives chances to reflect on what has already been learnt and what is to be learnt as well as chances to assess oneself (over 80%). About six to seven out of ten students believe that the feedback they get is regular and detailed (8<sup>th</sup> group), while the adoption of computer-based testing does not seem to help in the direction

of remedial feedback. Most students (over 80%) believe that the feedback focuses on areas (9<sup>th</sup> group) where they have gone wrong and on future action, and not on personal characteristics. They also largely think (over 80%) that feedback is timely, that is received while it still matters, so that they could pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance (10<sup>th</sup> group).

	Questions	totally agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	totally disagree
26	Assignments give me the opportunity to use the discourse of the discipline.	23.3	56.7	20.0		
27	Assignments give me the opportunity to "read around" and "construct arguments".	33.3	56.7	6.7	3.3	
28	I tackle assignments so as to maximize the marks I obtain.	13.3	36.7	36.7	13.3	
29	I tackle assignments so as to maximize the learning achieved from engaging with the assignment.	36.7	56.7	6.7		

Table 5: Assignments as related to learning

As regards the relation of the feedback received to the goals of the assignment (Table 7, 11<sup>th</sup> group), almost all students are of the opinion that the feedback is appropriate to the purpose of the assignment (96.7%), promotes metacognition (86.7%), develops understanding (82.7%), and supplies explanation for the mark given (80%). More than half of them believe that the feedback is used to correct errors (65.5%) and to promote the development of generic skills (63.3%), while fewer than half of them think that it suggests further studying (43.4%). As for the criteria, it is evident that model answers and good practices (90%) as well as self-assessment (73.3%) establish high expectations and motivation. According to the respondents, the criteria include high-level goals (86.7%) rather than low-level ones (55.1%), and are explicit and comprehensible (73.3%). The feedback also seems to relate to students' understanding (12<sup>th</sup> group), since it provides sufficient information on appropriate tackling of the task (76.6%), clears up misunderstandings (69%) and clarifies what the tutor is looking for in an assignment (63.3%), and does not treat learning as passive acquisition of information.

As regards students' attention to the feedback comments (Table 8, 13<sup>th</sup> group), all students read the tutor's comments when they receive the assignment back. A large number (66.7%) would like to have a second chance by getting the feedback first so as to improve their mark, but not only the feedback without a mark. It does not seem to be of great importance to students to self-assess themselves and be provided with a mark after self-assessment, or specify what they would like feedback on.

	Questions	totally agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	totally disagree
30	The feedback I get includes suggestions for improvement.	40.0	40.0	16.7	3.3	
31	The feedback I get gives me chances to reflect on what I have learnt and what I still have to learn.	26.7	56.7	13.3	3.3	
32	The feedback I get gives me chances to assess myself.	24.1	62.1	10.3	3.4	
33	The feedback I get is regular.	33.3	40.0	16.7	10.0	

34	The feedback I get is detailed and extensive.	23.3	40.0	26.7	10.0	
35	I think that the adoption of computer-based testing would provide remedial feedback.	3.3	16.7	60.0	20.0	
36	The feedback I get tells me where I have gone wrong.	26.7	60.0	10.0	3.3	
37	The feedback tells me what I can do about things I did wrong (future action).	40.0	40.0	10.0	10.0	
38	The feedback I get has a critical focus on personal characteristics.	3.3	10.0	26.7	30.0	30.0
39	I receive feedback fast enough, while it still matters.	16.7	63.3	16.7	3.3	
40	I receive feedback in time for me to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance.	23.3	63.3	13.3		

Table 6: Feedback related to learning

	Questions	totally agree	agree	neither agree nor	disagree	totally disagree
41	The feedback is appropriate to the purpose of the assignment.	46.7	50.0	3.3		
42	The feedback is used to correct errors.	24.1	41.4	27.6	6.9	
43	The feedback is used to develop understanding through explanations.	31.0	51.7	13.8	3.4	
44	The feedback is used to generate more learning by suggesting further specific study tasks.	16.7	26.7	33.3	23.3	
45	The feedback is used to promote the development of generic skills (applied across a variety of subject domains).	33.3	30.0	33.3	3.3	
46	The feedback is used to promote metacognition by encouraging my reflection on and awareness of learning processes involved in the assignment.	36.7	50.0	10.0	3.3	
47	The feedback explains why I have got a specific assignment mark.	20.0	60.0	10.0	10.0	
48	The criteria for a successful assignment are explicit and understood.	23.3	50.0	23.3	3.3	
49	The criteria include low-level goals (e.g. style and presentation).	10.3	44.8	17.2	27.6	
50	The criteria include high-level goals (e.g. theoretical and conceptual understanding).	36.7	50.0	13.3		
51	Model answers and good practices establish high expectations and motivation.	36.7	53.3	6.7	3.3	
52	Self-assessment (e.g. use of rubrics) helps me internalize high expectations.	20.0	53.3	23.3	3.3	
53	The feedback provides sufficient information about whether I have tackled the task appropriately.	23.3	53.3	23.3		
54	What the tutor is looking for in an assignment is quite clear.	13.3	50.0	30.0	6.7	
55	The feedback is sensitive to the unsophisticated conceptions of learning (learning as passive reception or active memorization of information) that might be revealed in my work.	6.9	27.6	44.8	17.2	3.4
56	The feedback helps me clear up any misunderstandings (e.g. about the content of the conclusion).	13.8	55.2	27.6	3.4	

Table 7: Feedback related to the goals of the assignment

	Questions	totally agree	agree	neither agree nor	disagree	totally disagree
57	I read the tutor's comments when I receive my assignment back.	79.3	20.7			
58	I would like to specify, on my assignment, what I would like feedback on.	16.7	20.0	46.7	16.7	
59	I would prefer to be provided with feedback but no marks to get an idea of how I am progressing.		10.0	23.3	46.7	20.0
60	I would like to self-assess my assignment to see if the tutor's views correspond to my own.	6.7	40.0	26.7	20.0	6.7
61	I would prefer to be given two-stage assignments with feedback on the first stage to improve the quality of work for a second stage submission, which is graded.	26.7	40.0	10.0	23.3	
62	I would like to be provided with a grade after self-assessment and tutor feedback have been completed.	13.3	26.7	36.7	20.0	3.3

Table 8: Students' attention to the feedback comments

Finally, as for the impact of feedback on future learning (Table, 9, 14<sup>th</sup> group), all or almost all students believe that feedback is realistic (100%), guides them on how to deal with the next assignments (93.4%), and does not lead to less study effort (96.7%) or just corrects errors (90%). Most of them think that feedback does not come late (83.3%), is rather forward- than backward-looking (73.3%), does not demand something the students do not know how to do (70%), or applies only to the particular assignment (66%). Most students would like to have group discussions so as to develop metacognition (66.6%) as well as a follow-up so as to check if they have taken any action (63.4%).

	Questions	totally agree	agree	neither agree nor	disagree	totally disagree
63	Feedback only corrects errors.			10.0	53.3	36.7
64	Feedback gives guidance on the way I go about the next assignments.	36.7	56.7	6.7		
65	Feedback comes too late to be acted on by me.			16.7	53.3	30.0
66	Feedback is backward looking -- addressing issues associated with material that will not be studied again.		6.7	20.0	40.0	33.3
67	Feedback is unrealistic.				46.7	53.3
68	Feedback asks me to do something I do not know how to do.	3.3	6.7	20.0	36.7	33.3
69	Feedback is context-specific and only applies to the particular assignment.	3.3	20.0	10.0	36.7	30.0
70	Feedback concerns generic issues such as study skills or approaches that generalize across assignments.	16.7	33.3	30.0	20.0	
71	Feedback is discouraging, leading to less study effort.		3.3		46.7	50.0
72	I would like a follow-up to check if I have taken any action.	16.7	46.7	23.3	10.0	3.3
73	Group discussion helps me develop metacognition and the ability to gain control over my own learning.	33.3	33.3	30.0	3.3	

Table 9: Impact of feedback on future learning

## **5. Discussion and further suggestions**

The research findings presented in the previous section reveal the significance of assessment and feedback in Distance Education students' learning, reflection and metacognition.

It is evident that assignments as a formative assessment tool and the feedback provided to students have a significant contribution to motivation and learning. Assignments measure a wide range of abilities, give students the opportunity to use the discourse of the discipline, allow them to organize their work in a better way and provide fairer results than exams, which could possibly make tutors reconsider the allocation of marks to assignments.

Timely, realistic and forward-looking feedback on written assignments is also of utmost importance. It includes suggestions for improvement and helps students understand, learn and cope with the final exams. It also enhances study effort, promotes metacognition, gives students chances to reflect on learning and assess themselves, and guides them on how to deal with future assignments. In addition, oral feedback, discussion at the contact sessions, problem sheets and group work activities help with learning and offer guidance. Model answers, good practices and self-assessment rubrics are criteria which establish high expectations and motivation. Thus, they should be integrated as established practices in contact sessions; good practices could be shared or uploaded on a special forum, and checklists could be constructed to help students think of the criteria set in each assignment and assess themselves. Since, due to deadlines, it is impossible to provide students with the feedback first so as to help them make improvements and then give the mark, a good practice could be to analytically comment on, discuss and provide feedback on the first assignment so that students would be able to effectively deal with the next assignments. In order to be effective, feedback should be detailed, suggest further studying and promote self-assessment. This leads us to question and probably reconsider the criteria used (content, language skills, literature used and application of theory to practice) and the comments made in the feedback form, so as to promote further studying, student learning and metacognition, according to the data of the research.

Naturally, further action research is necessary in order to diagnose problems with the courses, reform assessment to address these problems and meet students' needs, and evaluate whether the changes made have a positive impact on learning (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005). It would also be interesting to use the specific research tool in order to correlate variables such as the type of feedback provided with students' motivation, effort and learning.

## **6. Conclusion**

The present study was a pilot research conducted at the Hellenic Open University and explored the conditions under which assessment and feedback affect learning. The research was developed on the set of conditions proposed by Gibbs and Simpson (2005), under which assessment and feedback support students' learning.

From the research and the results analyzed above, it seems that these conditions are satisfied: Assessment, especially formative assessment, and effective, detailed and regular feedback, related to the goals of the assignments, have a dominant influence on students' understanding and learning. Assignments, as a form of formative assessment, also relate to learning and affect students' motivation and the time and effort allocated to them. Another

significant factor for Distance Education students is that formative assessment and feedback support communication between students and tutors.

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