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Feedforward: Addressing the Issue of Ineffective Feedback

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Background

The problem:
- Student satisfaction with feedback is frequently low ([1,2,3])
- Tutors spend hours writing feedback which appears to be largely ineffective at reducing students' errors or increasing average grades

Identified causes of the problem:
- Current linear model of feedback delivery (figure 1) - feedback is 'left' for students to read ([4]) - there is little dialogue about the feedback ([5])
- Timeliness - feedback is received 3-4 weeks after submission - its relevance and utility are lost on students
- Misinterpretation of feedback - reportedly markers' comments are unclear, not constructive, lack relevancy or specificity - shorthand and abbreviated comments add to the problem ([6])
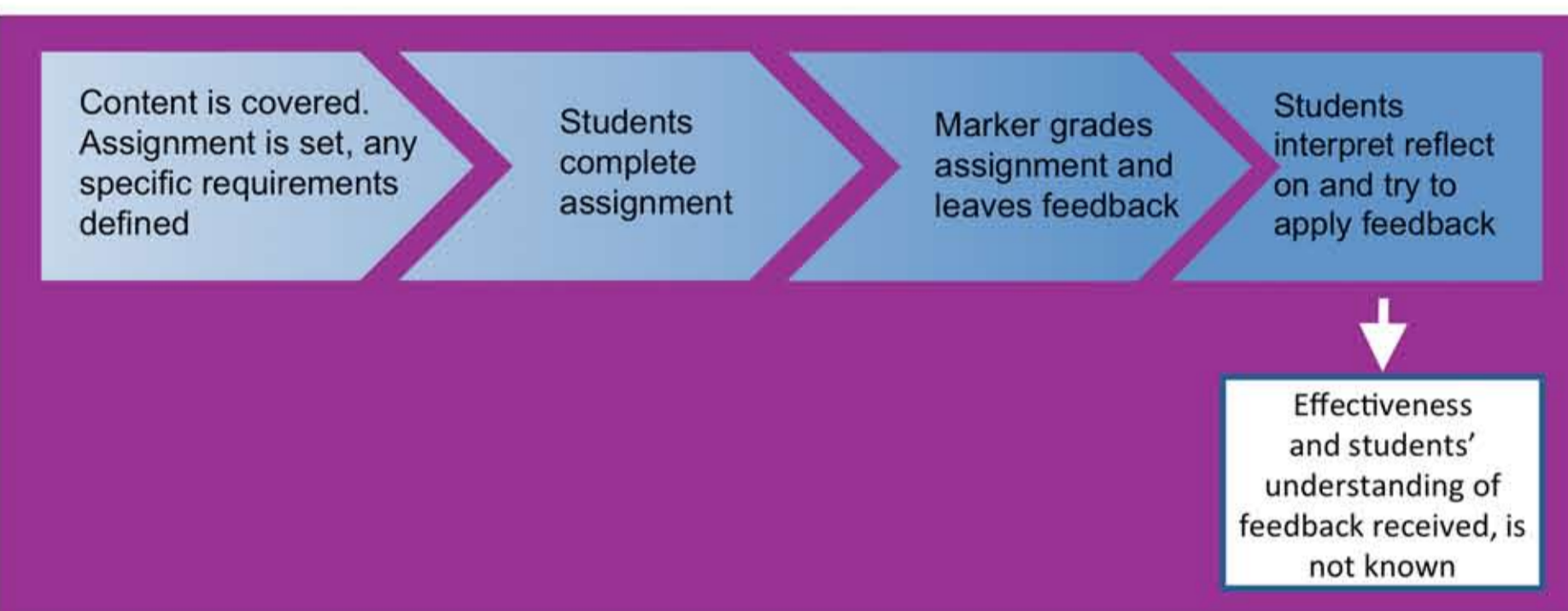

Figure 1. Current Linear Model of Feedback

Aims

The aim was to design an engaging, interactive, undergraduate Research Methods 1 (RM1) 'feedforward' seminar to address:

- Linear model of feedback delivery ([6]) - by creating more opportunity for dialogue between students and tutors about the marking and feedback process (see figure 2)
- Timeliness - by providing this dialogue prior to assignment submission
- Misinterpretation of feedback - by highlighting poor, good and excellent submissions, demystifying feedback comments, and encouraging students to engage with the marking criteria and their feedback on Turnitin

Subsequently, this innovation should expedite both learning and development rather than retard them as the current approach appears to.
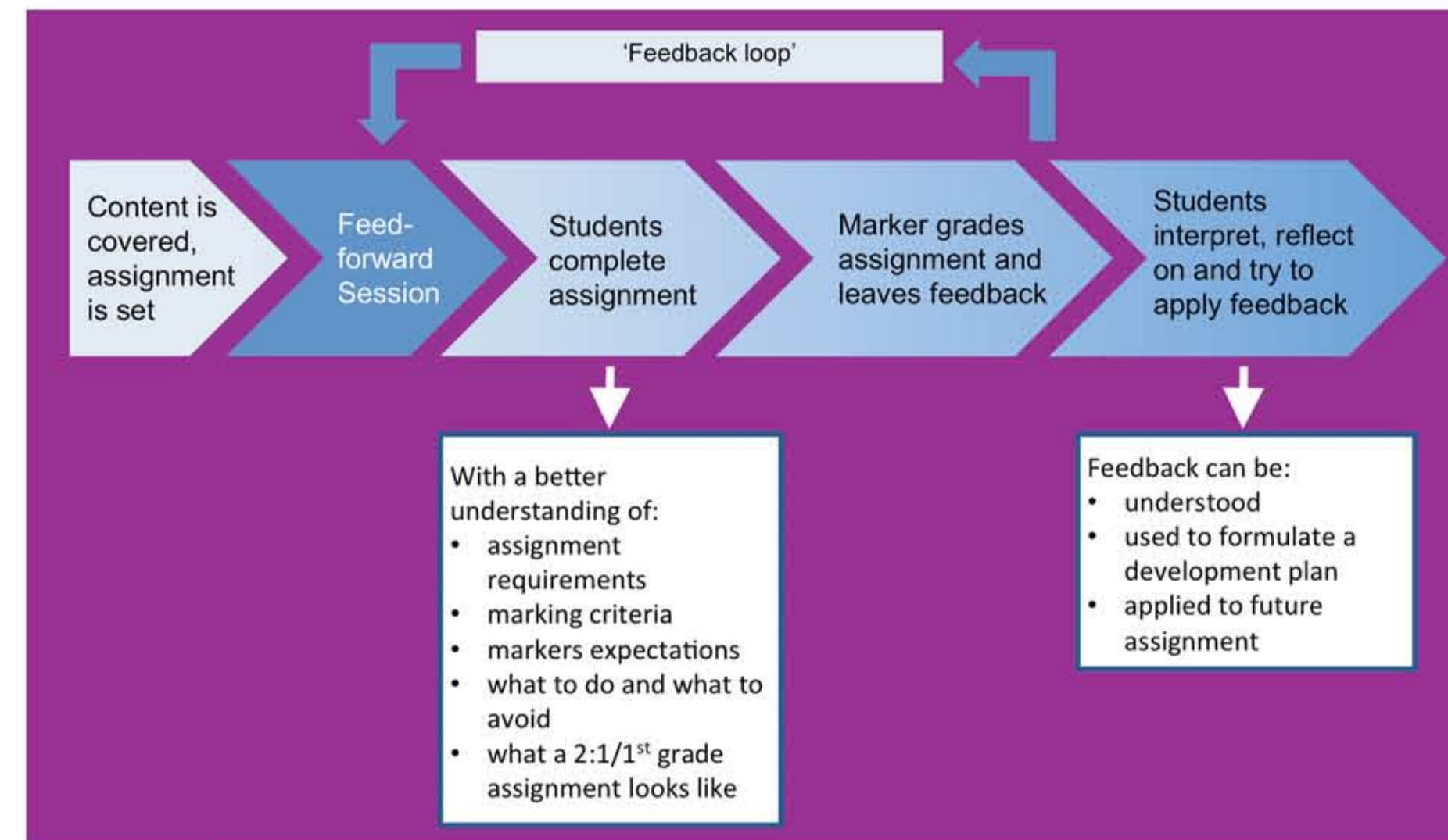

Figure 2. Proposed Feedforward Seminar Model

Method

The results section of research reports was identified as an area of RM1 assignments that students frequently struggle with. An example of this section with good points and deliberate errors was shown in the seminar. Students responded to a series of questions about the results section and graded it using the marking criteria via a live Qualtrics poll using PCs, smartphones and tablets.
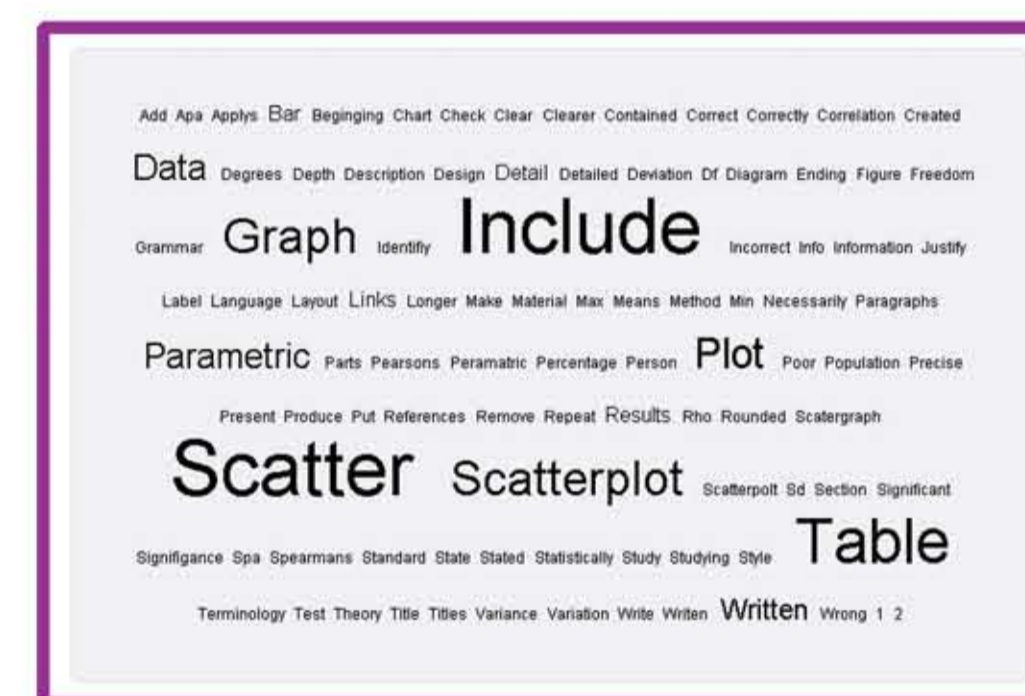
Word cloud showing responses to the question 'Please list three ways in which this results section could be improved.'

Chart showing mean responses to the questions 'How well do you think the Results section above meets the marking criteria below?'
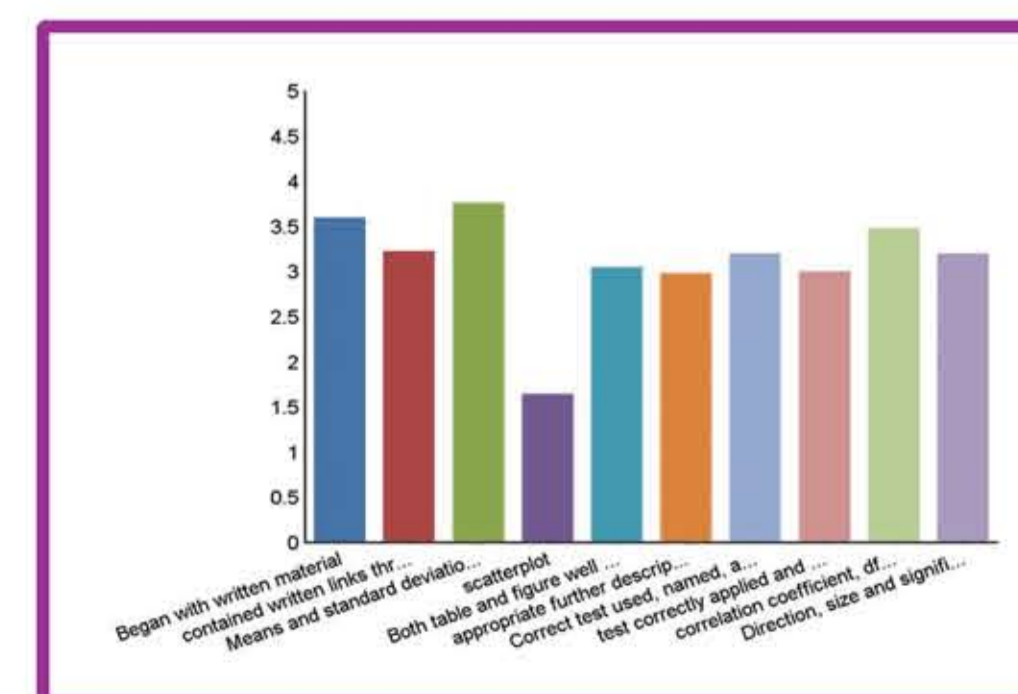
Results

Turnitin analytics showed 96% of current RM1 students accessed their online assignment feedback, compared with only 62% of students for the same assignment in the previous year. Encouraging students to access their feedback on Turnitin was one of the key objectives of the feedforward seminars.

Although the median mark for feedforward seminar attendees was higher than for non-attendees (figure 3), a Mann-Whitney U test showed the difference was not significant (U = 1053, z = -.894, p = .187, one-tailed).
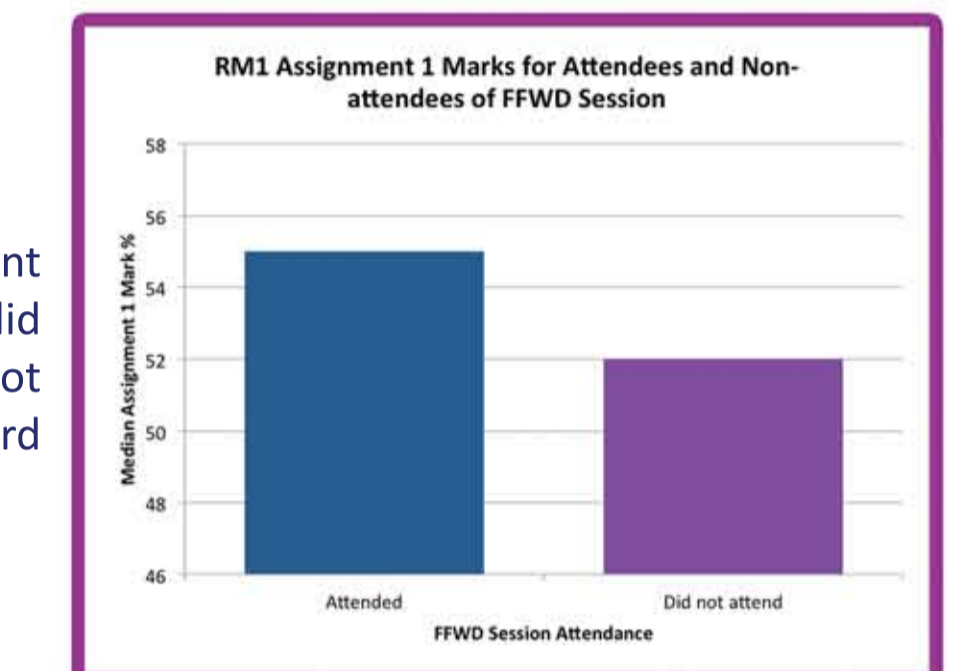

Figure 3. Median assignment marks for students who did (n-87), and those that did not attend (n=29), a feedforward seminar

Discussion

The problem of ineffective feedback was addressed by designing and delivering an innovative, engaging 'feedforward' seminar.

Qualitatively, students and tutors reported enjoying the seminars. Students found them helpful and tutors felt they were effective in their aim. However there was no significant effect on grades.

The seminars may have occurred too early in the degree for first year undergraduates to apply the information, having not submitted any assignments or received any feedback on their work. This may then have lead to the information becoming 'lost' as they were unaware of how or where to apply it.

Therefore feedforward seminars should be:
- delivered later in the academic year, once students have received some feedback, reflected on their work and can apply, the feedforward seminar to their own work (7,8)
- more instructive, whilst maintaining open dialogue (5,9,6,10), as students at this level may be less aware of what is required of them in their assignments (5).

Future research should aim to identify the most effective time of the academic year to deliver feedforward seminars.

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