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ELECTRONIC AUDIO FEEDBACK IN LEGAL EDUCATION

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I INTRODUCTION

Providing assessment feedback to students can be a time-consuming and resource-intensive task in tertiary education. The challenge of delivering meaningful and timely feedback is compounded by features of the modern neoliberal university, including ‘increases in class size, overloading of teaching staff and fragmentation of continuity of teachers’.¹ With the rapid expansion of online and blended learning environments, teachers face the additional challenge of understanding and effectively using digital assessment tools, the implementation of which is often at significant cost to universities. Despite the substantial allocation of time and resources to the provision of feedback, the discourse surrounding it indicates that students regularly feel dissatisfied with the level of feedback they receive, whilst academic staff perceive a lack of student engagement with the feedback they provide.² This article considers whether recorded audio forms of assessment feedback, or electronic audio feedback (EAF), can offer a creative solution to this impasse. It explores the effectiveness of EAF, including how it can enhance student engagement with assessment feedback and the richness of the feedback provided, alongside reducing the intense resource requirements associated with providing assessment feedback in higher education settings.³

This article reports on a study of EAF use among undergraduate and postgraduate law students at the University of Technology Sydney. It

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¹ David Boud and Elizabeth Molloy, ‘Rethinking Models of Feedback for Learning: The Challenge of Design’ (2013) 38(6) *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 698, 700; Josh McCarthy, ‘Evaluating Written, Audio and Video Feedback in Higher Education Summative Assessment Tasks’ (2015) 25(2) *Issues in Educational Research* 153, 154.

² Boud and Molloy (n 1) 698; John B Killoran, ‘Reel-to-Reel Tapes, Cassettes, and Digital Audio Media: Reverberations from a Half-Century of Recorded-Audio Response to Student Writing’ (2013) 30(1) *Computers and Composition* 37, 44.

³ Edna Holland Mory, ‘Feedback Research Revisited’ in D H Jonasson (ed), *Handbook of Research on Educational Communications and Technology* (2nd ed, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2004) 745; Kirsten Zimbardi et al, ‘Are They Using My Feedback? The Extent of Students’ Feedback Use has a Large Impact on Subsequent Academic Performance’ (2017) 42(4) *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 625.

first provides a brief overview of relevant literature. The article then outlines the design, methodology and outcomes of the study. The pedagogical implications of EAF are then discussed. These include that EAF use allows for the provision of more detailed feedback in a shorter period of time; compels students to engage with feedback in a slower, more sustained fashion; caters to a greater variety of learning approaches (especially when used alongside written feedback); is able to simulate an authentic feedback experience in professional practice; and better facilitates personalised, constructive feedback – something that students significantly value. In short, EAF may assist in remedying the mutual dissatisfaction both students and staff feel towards assessment feedback.

II ELECTRONIC AUDIO FEEDBACK IN TERTIARY LEGAL EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Effective feedback is clear, specific and sensitive to the individual and task being assessed.⁴ The literature on good practice in relation to the provision and role of feedback underscores that students should play an active role in making use of feedback.⁵ Feedback should also be usable: students should be able to use feedback to make ‘demonstrable improvements to their work and learning strategies’;⁶ motivate students to do better; and be criteria-referenced.⁷ The affective and relational dimensions of feedback cannot be ignored in its design; negative emotional responses from students can affect their motivation to improve and potentially influence their continuation of a degree or pursuit of a career.⁸ In the context of Australian legal education, feedback is also recognised as an integral way in which Bachelor of Laws graduates acquire the threshold learning outcome of ‘self-management’, which involves attaining the ability to ‘(a) learn and work independently, and (b) reflect on and assess their own capabilities and performance, and make use of feedback as appropriate, to support personal and professional development’.⁹

⁴ Tracii Ryan, Michael Henderson and Michael Phillips, ‘Written Feedback Doesn’t Make Sense’: Enhancing Assessment Feedback Using Technologies’ (Conference Paper, Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, 2016) <<https://www.aare.edu.au/publications/aare-conference-papers/show/11095/written-feedback-doesnt-make-sense-enhancing-assessment-feedback-using-technologies>>.

⁵ Boud and Molloy (n 1), 699.

⁶ Phillip Dawson et al, ‘What Makes for Effective Feedback: Staff and Student Perspectives’ (2018) 44(1) *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 23, 34.

⁷ Phillip Dawson et al (n 6); Jinrui Li and Rosemary De Luca, ‘Review of assessment feedback’ (2014) 39(2) *Studies in Higher Education* 378.

⁸ Tracii Ryan and Michael Henderson, ‘Feeling Feedback: Students’ Emotional Responses to Educator Feedback’ (2018) 43(6) *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 880.

⁹ Australian Learning and Teaching Council, Bachelor of Laws: Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Statement (December 2010), 10. <<https://cald.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/KiftetalLTASStandardsStatement2010.pdf>>

While there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to designing effective feedback,¹⁰ scholarship suggests that when compared with more traditional written methods of feedback, *oral* or *audio* feedback may be effective mediums to help achieve these aims. According to Merry and Orsmond, students ‘perceive and implement audio file feedback in different and more meaningful ways than written feedback’.¹¹ Furthermore, EAF has the capacity to simulate some of the demands of professional practice when compared with written feedback by engaging students in simulated ‘real-world’ experiences of oral feedback.

Several themes emerge from the body of literature that examines EAF use. First, students feel that audio feedback allows for a more personal and engaging experience with their instructors.¹² They report that the ability to discern the tone of an instructor’s voice assists comprehension of the instructor’s intended meaning in feedback more clearly than with text alone.¹³ In addition, students find EAF more ‘positive’ in its orientation or ‘tone’ when compared to written feedback,¹⁴ noting that tone of voice and other ‘rich’ cues present in a recording have the capacity to better communicate intended meaning, with a reduction in confusion regarding the tenor of feedback that short, written commentary can engender.¹⁵ EAF directed at individual students is perceived as far more individualised;¹⁶ establishes a strong(er) connection with the marker;¹⁷ and is more engaging for the

¹⁰ Boud and Molloy (n 1) 698; citing Valerie Shute, ‘Focus on Formative Feedback’ (2008) 78(1) *Review of Educational Research* 153.

¹¹ Stephen Merry and Paul Orsmond, ‘Students’ Attitudes to and Usage of Academic Feedback Provided Via Audio Files’ (2008) 11(1) *Bioscience Education* 1, 7.

¹² Chris M Anson, ‘In Our Own Voices: Using Recorded Commentary to Respond to Writing’ [1997] (69) *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 105; Tom Lunt and John Curran, ‘“Are You Listening Please?” The Advantages of Electronic Audio Feedback Compared to Written Feedback’ (2010) 35(7) *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 759; Annette M Bourgault, Cynthia Mundy and Thomas Joshua, ‘Comparison of Audio vs Written Feedback on Clinical Assignments of Nursing Students’ (2013) 34(1) *Nursing Education Perspectives* 43; Merry and Orsmond (n 11); Doris A Van Horn-Christopher, ‘Voice-Graded Business Communication Documents’ (1995) 58(3) *Business Communication Quarterly* 35; Kathryn A Wood, Cary Moskovitz and Theresa M Valiga, ‘Audio Feedback for Student Writing in Online Nursing Courses: Exploring Student and Instructor Reactions’ (2011) 50(9) *Journal of Nursing Education* 540.

¹³ Clare Carruthers et al, ‘“I Like the Sound of That”: An Evaluation of Providing Audio Feedback via the Virtual Learning Environment for Summative Assessment’ (2015) 40(3) *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 352; Andrew J Cavanaugh and Liyan Song, ‘Audio Feedback versus Written Feedback: Instructors’ and Students’ Perspectives’ (2014) 10(1) *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* 122; Thomas David Clark, ‘Cassette Tapes: An Answer to the Grading Dilemma’ (1981) 44(2) *ABCA Bulletin* 40; Paul A Kirschner, Henk van den Brink and Marthie Meester, ‘Audiotape Feedback for Essays in Distance Education’ (1991) 15(2) *Innovative Higher Education* 185; Wood, Moskovitz and Valiga (n 12).

¹⁴ Bourgault, Mundy and Joshua (n 12); Carruthers et al (n 13).

¹⁵ Wood, Moskovitz and Valiga (n 12); Cavanaugh and Song (n 13).

¹⁶ Cf Michael Henderson and Michael Phillips, ‘Video-Based Feedback on Student Assessment: Scarily Personal’ (2015) 31(1) *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology* 51.

¹⁷ Anson (n 12); Lunt and Curran (n 12).

student. Indeed, in one study, '[a]ll participants perceived audio feedback to be more personal than written feedback'.¹⁸ Sixty-eight per cent of students in Nemec and Dintzner's study concurred, with the authors concluding that providing 'audio feedback is a way to help meet the request for approachability with feedback that is felt to be more personalized' and, ultimately, more effective.¹⁹

Linguistic and text analysis-based research confirms this perception, with a number of studies demonstrating that there is, in fact, a quantitative increase in positive language use when audio feedback is utilised.²⁰ According to some research, EAF has the capacity to provide a more detailed analysis of student work with a greater quantity of explanation when compared with written feedback.²¹ Finally, the literature suggests that EAF for summative assessment offers the benefits of ease of access and the facilitation of feed-forward learning.²²

For the marker of an assessment, producing feedback electronically has been described as faster and more efficient.²³ Challenges to the utilisation of EAF consistently identified by the literature include instructor scepticism regarding the use of 'new' technology;²⁴ perceptions that audio feedback production is more time-consuming;²⁵ and the additional effort required to listen to comments rather than read/skim written commentary, which may be easier to retain or return to for review.²⁶ With respect to the latter challenge, Killoran suggests that 'some of audio-recording's time commitment can be reduced after overcoming the initial learning curve and developing an efficient routine'.²⁷

¹⁸ Bourgault, Mundy and Joshua (n 12) 44.

¹⁹ Eric C Nemec and Matthew Dintzner, 'Comparison of Audio versus Written Feedback on Writing Assignments' (2016) 8(2) *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning* 155, 157.

²⁰ Ibid; Merry and Orsmond (n 11).

²¹ Killoran (n 2); Bourgault, Mundy and Joshua (n 12); Sarah K Nielsen, 'Instructional Insights: Audio Feedback as Means of Engaging the Occupational Therapy Student' (2016) 30(1) *Occupational Therapy in Health Care* 107; Lunt and Curran (n 12).

²² Carruthers et al (n 13).

²³ Philip Ice et al, 'Using Asynchronous Audio Feedback to Enhance Teaching Presence and Students' Sense of Community' (2007) 11(2) *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 3, 18; Lunt and Curran (n 12) 761; Kirschner, van den Brink and Meester (n 13) 192. Cf the finding of Carruthers et al, that while there was no noticeable time-saving in the provision of feedback, feedback quality and detail overall improved: Carruthers et al (n 13) 366.

²⁴ Cavanaugh and Song (n 13) 130.

²⁵ Killoran (n 2).

²⁶ Wood, Moskovitz and Valiga (n 12) 542; Genevieve Marie Johnson and Audrey Cooke, 'Student Use of Audio, Video, and Written Teacher Feedback: The Predictive Utility of Learning Modality Preference, Self-Regulated Learning, and Learning Style' (2014) 5(2) *International Journal of University Teaching and Faculty Development* 111.

²⁷ Killoran (n 2) 45.

III THE ELECTRONIC AUDIO FEEDBACK PROJECT: OBJECTIVES AND IMPACT

To explore the pedagogical benefits of audio feedback within tertiary legal education, a program trialling the use of EAF among undergraduate and postgraduate students was implemented at the Faculty of Law, University of Technology Sydney (the EAF Project). The overarching aims of the EAF Project were threefold: (1) to facilitate student learning by increasing student engagement with feedback and encouraging its use to improve student work; (2) to further embed key faculty-level graduate attributes (critical analysis and evaluation, communication and collaboration, and self-management); and (3) to enable students to experience ‘real-world’ methods of receiving and using feedback.

In the context of the study, the academic staff members’ provision of EAF was relatively straightforward: they utilised the voice recording feature embedded in the Turnitin platform already used to facilitate assessment feedback. Despite the availability of this method to provide feedback, a review of the use of Turnitin’s audio feedback feature suggested that this option was underutilised by those providing feedback. This is not surprising. Recent scholarship has found that academic staff are not immediately comfortable with providing audio feedback. Cavanaugh and Song, for example, point out that whilst students might enjoy the audio feedback process, instructors may not: ‘[t]he lack of exposure to the audio method of commenting on papers can affect an instructor’s style and comfort level with the delivery of audio’.²⁸ It is important to recall, however, that this reported sense of discomfort is not unique to the provision of audio or oral forms of feedback.²⁹ As Killoran suggests, academics are not necessarily satisfied with written feedback either:

instructors perceived that writing out comments sufficiently detailed and explanatory to be useful was too time consuming.... Some reported that students often did not even read their written comments. Indeed, it was frustration with written response that prompted some [...] to experiment with recorded-audio response.³⁰

Despite these challenges, contemporary scholarship suggests that providing students with EAF for assessments has the potential to yield a number of benefits: first, an increase in the quality of formative, individualised feedback provided to students by way of enhancing the ease and speed of generating feedback,³¹ and second, improving the

²⁸ Cavanaugh and Song (n 13) 130.

²⁹ Michael Henderson, Tracii Ryan and Michael Phillips, ‘The Challenges of Feedback in Higher Education’ (2019) 44(8) *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 1237.

³⁰ Killoran (n 2) 44.

³¹ C Glenn Pearce and R Jon Ackley, ‘Audiotaped Feedback in Business Writing: An Exploratory Study’ (1995) 58(3) *Business Communication Quarterly* 31, 33 (‘Audiotaped Feedback in Business Writing’); Kirschner, van den Brink and Meester (n 6); Nemec and Dintzner (n 19); Merry and Orsmond (n 11).

speed of the assessment feedback cycle and with it, the timeliness of feedback.³² The objective of the EAF Project was to test these assumptions in a real-world tertiary setting whilst seeking to understand whether students regard the provision of EAF as timely, fair and of high quality.

IV RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The EAF Project was designed to evaluate EAF practices in core/compulsory and elective law subjects undertaken by both undergraduate and postgraduate law students. For the purposes of this study, EAF was understood to be digitally recorded audio commentary or discussion of a student's assessment task against the relevant assessment criteria and task objectives. The EAF Project examined students' reception of EAF to evaluate whether they regard this form of feedback as timely, fair and of high quality. The research also analysed whether the students understood the EAF approach as successfully simulating an authentic feedback experience in professional practice.

A *Project Design*

The EAF Project designed, trialled and evaluated EAF use in Law Faculty subjects. First, the EAF Project developed a model for providing EAF to students. A literature review was conducted, focusing on effective EAF use in other higher-education settings to distil a standard set of considerations for its production. This review focused primarily on the use and perception of EAF processes in tertiary education contexts, with a particular focus on global literature addressing the arts and sciences, as well as law and legal studies.³³ Notably, there is not a significant body of literature on the use of this mode of feedback within a legal education context.

Assessors were provided with a standard model of feedback in the form of a semi-structured set of prompts, which encouraged them to begin with addressing the student by name, followed by the provision of a 'global' assessment of the submission, feedback on individual assessment criteria (eg, legal knowledge, expression, and legal and academic citation practices), highlighting particular areas of written feedback or notes provided on the paper where relevant, motivational comments and, finally, feed-forward material articulating feedback into practical focuses for the following assessment.

³² Lunt and Curran (n 12); Bourgault, Mundy and Joshua (n 12); Carruthers et al (n 13).

³³ See, eg, Lunt and Curran (n 12); Cavanaugh and Song (n 13); Carruthers et al (n 13); Wood, Moskovitz and Valiga (n 12); Bourgault, Mundy and Joshua (n 12); Nielsen (n 21); Merry and Orsmond (n 11); Killoran (n 2); Anson (n 12); Nemeš and Dintzner (n 19).

B *Electronic Audio Feedback Project Execution*

The EAF Project was conducted in two distinct phases: in the Trial Phase, academics agreed to provide EAF for part or all of their assessment feedback activities, and in the Evaluation Phase, students who had received EAF were interviewed to elicit their experience and assessment of the provision of EAF. Academic staff who had provided EAF were also interviewed to seek their feedback on its use. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee.³⁴ The objectives and outcomes of each phase are detailed below.

1 *Trial Phase*

EAF was trialled in three law subjects. During this period, three colleagues trialled the production of EAF on the assessment work of approximately 130 students. In two of the subjects, the standard EAF model was utilised. In the third subject, EAF was provided without the direct use of the standard model. In all subjects, written (in-line) comments were also provided, alongside three minutes of audio voice recording using Turnitin software. As such, the overall feedback provided to students was multimodal: EAF replaced the marker's general or summative comments, but in-line written feedback was still provided to pinpoint specific examples where the student did well or their work needed improvement.

A representative piece of EAF that was generated during the project's trial phase is transcribed here in full:

Hello [student's name blinded], thank you for the opportunity to review your paper. A really, really excellently written piece, you should be very proud of this, well done. Some overall comments I have made on the paper; have a look at those. I have made quite a few. There is [sic] not a lot of areas where I can critique, but where I have found some, I have been able to provide some critique to help you sharpen your analysis in the future.

It was a very clear, very crisp, very well written piece. That adds a lot of value, so do keep that up. I can tell you've spent a lot of time thinking through and editing this, so well done for that. Your sentences are short and crisp and clear. There is a real economy to your writing, you should really maintain that. I would suggest that this is a major strength of yours.

First half and second half [of the assignment] are probably equally as good as each other, although I do make a couple of points [via in-line comments], probably more so in the first half. Many of those are just very minor or I'm being particularly picky, largely comments rather than critique, just to simply provide you with some grist for the mill as you revise and improve into your next subjects.

I would suggest, as a way of improving, it's just thinking about the balance between the coverage of particular areas and others. It's pretty clear, I think, that certain areas don't require the kind of level of treatment that you give

³⁴ University of Technology Sydney, 'Electronic Oral Feedback' (Human Research Ethics Committee Approval No ETH17-1801, 2017).

it. For example, you know, your treatment of, say, for example, [the case of] Royall and causation is excellent, but you probably could have taken, I don't know, two or three, maybe potentially four sentences out of that, because I think it was quite straightforward really.

Another thing which...and I should say, you could have taken those sentences and popped them towards the end in relation, say, to negligence particularly, which would have really helped.

I think one thing just to look out for is the consistency of your construction throughout, particularly in relation, say, to the actus reus, you construct that initially as a continuous transaction – and well done for citing [the case of] Taber for that, that's fantastic, very few people have been able to do that successfully – but then I feel like sometimes it sort of falls apart, and you start talking about what you term 'the act', that is, the 'transaction', as a single act only, or then as an omission only, or that kind of thing. So, I think, for that reason, just keeping really, really crisp on that point, that's where you really, kind of, get your good work in.

I would suggest too that in relation to negligence, and particularly the omission, there needed to be slightly more treatment of the duty to act, in order to make that out. But you could have probably done the whole thing based on an act or an omission, but it was fine to do it based on a transaction.

But well done, really proud of you here. Well done.

This EAF transcription is typical of the electronic feedback generated during the EAF project. Common features discerned from EAF use during the project are detailed in Part V.

2 *Evaluation Phase*

Following the EAF pilot, the project team conducted in-depth interviews with staff and students to examine their reception of EAF and whether students regarded the provision of this form of feedback as timely, fair and of high quality. The research team also analysed whether the students understood EAF as a successful simulation of an authentic feedback experience in professional practice, where feedback is often provided in oral form rather than as extensive written critiques on documents.

Given the aims of this research, three key foci guided the Evaluation Phase of the EAF Project. First, student experiences of accessing, hearing and utilising EAF were examined to enhance EAF standards and develop guidelines for markers. Second, EAF's student-reported acceptability and efficacy were evaluated using indicators, including the impact of EAF on student understanding of the grades awarded; student comprehension of feedback in relation to detailed aspects of written assessments; student engagement with feedback and capacity to develop strategies for improvement in future assessments; and student connection with the marker and with their feedback. Third and finally, the Evaluation Phase examined the effectiveness and efficiency of providing feedback via electronic oral means from the perspective of the academic staff (markers).

To address these research areas, interviews were conducted with staff and students. The interviews were transcribed and de-identified, and data from the transcripts were qualitatively coded and analysed in line with framework and grounded theory approaches.³⁵ The methodology for the interviewee recruitment, interview transcription and data analysis is described below.

(a) Student Recruitment and Interviews

To recruit a broad range of student interviewees, a number of classes were identified in which EAF had been used by academic staff. Both undergraduate and postgraduate student groups were identified. Target subjects were the mixed undergraduate/postgraduate subject Criminal Law and Procedure (a compulsory, or core, first-year subject), the undergraduate elective Family Law and the senior postgraduate elective Justice. Students in these units received a preliminary classification according to whether records identified them as being a recipient of EAF or purely written feedback. Interview recruitment emails were sent to the identified students, with a summary of the project and ethics approval attached.

A total of 453 students were identified and contacted by way of email as potential interviewees. Thirty-five of these students offered to partake in a telephone interview during the time period proposed (an initial response rate of 7.73 per cent). During the recruitment and formal consent process, one student withdrew consent prior to being interviewed. A further six students failed to respond to follow-up requests to organise an interview time.

All interviewees were contacted by email and telephone to organise a convenient time for an interview, and to facilitate the signing of a digital consent form. Semi-structured interview questions were developed in an iterative fashion, as the researchers reflected on their own experience of offering oral feedback and explored the literature on oral and audio feedback. During each interview, structured questions aided open feedback from students regarding their expectations and experiences of feedback at the university in both audio and other formats.

As the interviews commenced, the research team continued to further revise and develop interview prompts. They discussed the content and themes raised in the interviews, attempting to develop and revise the interview prompts to achieve thematic saturation. When the researchers agreed that saturation was reached in relation to the core aims of the evaluation, it was determined that no further interviews were required.

(b) Staff Recruitment and Interviews

³⁵ See Matthew Kiernan and Mick Hill, 'Framework analysis: a whole paradigm approach' (2018) 18(3) *Qualitative Research Journal* 248; Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (Sage Publications, 2006); Barney Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory* (Sociology Press, 1978).

Three staff members were interviewed for the project. They had already provided oral feedback in their own contexts: two staff members within the core subject Criminal Law and Procedure, and one in the elective subject Family Law.

(c) *Data Analysis*

A commercial transcription company produced the student interview transcripts. The transcriptionists applied pseudonyms provided by the researchers to mask the participants' identities in the labelling of responses. The overarching aims of the EAF Project were to evaluate and explore EAF use in targeted subjects. Given this broad focus, the interview data were first examined in an exploratory manner to particularly focus on the students' and staff's experiences – both positive and negative – of the provision of EAF. The second phase of analysis utilised framework analysis, which assessed the transcript data through the lens of an *a priori* framework developed through a literature review of oral and audio feedback research in tertiary education.³⁶ The framework also considered the aims of this project and the exploratory analysis described above.

Due to the sample size of the interviewed students and academics, the authors are reluctant to make general or representative claims about EAF applicable to other tertiary education settings and student cohorts. Instead, the discussion that follows summarises the prevalent themes arising from the project's trial and data analysis phases. It highlights the advantages of electronic audio and multimodal feedback identified by the interview participants; challenges specific to EAF; and suggests future lines of inquiry. The discussion also reflects on the need to consider mode alongside other critical aspects of feedback, including content and tone.

V KEY FINDINGS AND EMERGING THEMES

A *Features of EAF Identified During the Trial Phase*

Following the examination of the EAF transcripts during the Trial Phase, four distinctive EAF features were readily identifiable when compared with traditional written feedback: increased word count, improved communication of tone, enhanced personal connection and personalisation of feedback, and richer provision of detail.

1 *Word Count*

During the Trial Phase, the average transcribed marker comment was 516 words long in the space of a three-minute recording, suggesting that EAF allows markers to generate an average of 172 words of feedback per minute. By comparison, the average person can generate between 38 and 40 words per minute when typing by hand.³⁷ Whilst this

³⁶ Kiernan and Hill (n 35).

³⁷ For comparative discussion see Killoran (n 2).

represents a significant increase in the production of feedback per minute of effort, it is likely that in the context of providing typed student assessment feedback in the online Turnitin platform, markers will type more slowly than even their own average typing speed due to the ‘stop-start’ nature of the typing (from one comment to the next) and the in-vivo generation of comments – rather than typing pre-written, heard or otherwise ‘known’ text. During the EAF Project, feedback provided in audio electronic form was able to provide students with significantly more feedback information in the same period of time.

2 *Tone*

During the Trial Phase, the ability of EAF to convey tone to students was a key consideration in the design of the feedback. Research has long recognised that when written communication is employed, the tone of the writer can be more difficult to discern.³⁸ However, compared with written feedback, the tone of the marker when providing EAF was readily discernible to the student throughout the audio text – including tone variability. The academics also noted the need to adapt their style across the first group of audio comments as they became aware of the effect of tone in conveying their intended meaning.

3 *Personal Connection and Personalised Feedback*

It is useful to note that in the transcript in Part IV above, the marker had taught the student in question in a face-to-face setting – a key factor seen in the marker’s less formal tone in the final sentence, and the more conversational tone used overall. However, the opening section of the transcript is typical of all other pieces of feedback generated during the EAF Project: students were addressed by name and personalised feedback for the assessment was provided in relation to the overall strengths and/or weaknesses of the paper. As discussed shortly, the students experienced this personalised, tone-rich form of feedback as overwhelmingly positive.

4 *Detail*

The final feature of EAF was the depth of detail that the academics provided during the voice recording when compared with traditional written forms of feedback. The level of detail provided in the transcript above far exceeds that which is typically achieved in written comments. Whilst it may not be unusual for a written comment to pinpoint areas for comment – or to repeatedly highlight a student’s recurring mistakes – in the case of EAF, the key two or three areas needing improvement were able to be analysed in greater depth and with greater clarity.

The interview transcript data analysis revealed several elements which make EAF a valuable tool for academics frustrated with a

³⁸ Idoia Elola and Ana Oskoz, ‘Supporting Second Language Writing Using Multimodal Feedback’ (2016) 49(1) *Foreign Language Annals* 58; Cavanaugh and Song (n 13).

perceived lack of student engagement with assessment feedback. A number of challenges also emerged from the project data analysis.

B Strengths of Electronic Audio Feedback

1 Electronic Audio Feedback Is Constructive and Helpful

The students were almost universally satisfied with the provision of EAF as a form of assessment feedback. In particular, they found EAF to be helpful compared with written forms of assessment feedback. As one student noted:

My general thoughts...I've only ever received [EAF] once and I was, I felt really sort of satisfied with the level of depth and really grateful that I have had someone that gives their time to my work and to respond so genuinely. (F2-Penny)³⁹

EAF was not only regarded as helpful by students who received this form of feedback in response to strong academic performance in their assessment, but also by students who received EAF in response to a weaker academic performance in the relevant task. M3-Eric, for example, received feedback that indicated serious and fundamental problems with his assessment. In this case, the provision of EAF was accompanied by a very low mark when compared with his earlier achievements. Yet, M3-Eric noted the emotional and practical benefits of EAF in this difficult moment:

M3-Eric: Certainly in my case, when I got the oral feedback, I got a lower mark than I was expecting for the essay [in my subject], and getting the oral feedback really cushioned the blow, putting aside the – I guess academic assistance of the oral feedback from an emotional point of view. It really assisted to get that because the delivery of the oral feedback was – I guess [I] had my feelings in mind in the way it was delivered. That may not have come across if it was written feedback.

Interviewer: Okay. The feedback brought you down slowly, in a sense.

M3-Eric: That's right. Yeah. I wouldn't say it sugar-coated it. It was clear in terms of where the improvements were needed, but the fact that it was given verbally meant that.... Let's say something was written that I needed to do better. You couldn't misinterpret the tone or something like that, and it was clear [there] were good reasons behind it and things like that. Yeah, soften the blow I guess, from an emotional point of view, and it made it clearer from an academic point of view.

In addition to students finding the provision of assessment feedback in electronic oral format clearer, detailed and more attuned to their feelings – and consequently less likely to provoke a negative emotional reaction – EAF also drove students to utilise the marker's comments in different ways when compared with written forms of feedback. For

³⁹ Student names have been pseudonymised, with the first letter of each string indicating the gender with which the student identifies (M/F/non-binary/prefer not to disclose), followed by a number signifying their progress in their studies of law (current degree) in years, and then a fictional name.

example, students generally reported that the audio recording itself forced them to engage with the feedback in real time, rather than facilitating a skimming of textual commentary:

In terms of the actual form and things, for me, I found it far more engaging. I actually sat down and instead of it being, okay, I read that mark and then I quickly skim over the comments, if I wanted the feedback, I had to sit there and listen at the pace of the person providing the feedback and let that sink in while I was able to examine my essay and read that while listening, and there is something about those two modes happening at once that worked really nicely; they complemented each other. (F2-Penny)

The research team noted that, in some cases, students' positive responses to audio feedback may be due to a particular student's own preferences regarding the aural reception of information and/or a difficulty in approaching written textual information:

Especially considering I find it difficult to read feedback and then go looking through my essay going, oh okay, all right, all right and then going back. That sort of back and forth I find to be quite disruptive. I am also not fantastic at sustaining my concentration when I read and I am much, much more engaged in terms of the way I learn and the way I process and remember things when I hear things orally or sometimes see them visually. But in terms of understanding what that feedback is, hearing it orally to me was so much more clear than a written comment. (F2-Penny)

Other students expressed a preference for feedback to be provided in a multimodal fashion – written feedback alongside audio feedback – noting, however, that if feedback were to be delivered only by use of an electronic audio recording, they nonetheless 'would listen to it' (F2-Elizabeth). One response suggested that whichever mode the feedback took, it was essential that the feedback was 'constructive...[and specified] what you need to focus on' (F2-Elizabeth).

2 *Electronic Audio Feedback Is Personal, Personalised and Supports the Sense of Connection Between the Student and Their Marker*

A clear theme that the students reported throughout the EAF Project interviews was the positive impact of the verbal nature of EAF. The students reported the verbal feedback format of EAF as facilitating enhanced understanding of their performance in the assessment task, as well as the establishment of a sense of connection with the marker which further facilitated their engagement with the feedback: 'You can understand each other a lot better when it's voice rather than text' (M3-Eric). F2-Penny reported her experience of receiving audio feedback and her later reflection on it:

I actually was laughing with my sister last night and I was telling her, we were just having this casual chat about that electronic feedback that I got and she just laughed her head off because I received the feedback when I was hanging out with her one night, we were just watching a movie or something in bed and I played it for her and she, at first she was amused and then she was like, oh my God, that's so attentive and so dedicated to actually helping the individual. That's above and beyond kind of thing. And

she laughed at the time and then she was like, what? Really? Surely that's not your tutor speaking about the feedback? And I was like, no, really it is, it's not just a written comment.

It appears that the sense of immediacy, which students identified as characteristic of EAF, contributed to them finding this mode of feedback both helpful and engaging. As noted by M3-Eric, 'I found that really valuable and helpful because it was so immediate. Yeah. I think there's a lot more space to expand that beyond just the [...] subject and into other realms. I think that's maybe where other subjects [not utilising EAF] fall down.'

And later, again:

I found it was quite personal and engaged. I remember [the marker] saying, 'Hi F2-Penny, I'm going to run you through this.' Knowing also his tone of voice and the way he spoke and that kind of thing, it felt a lot more personal. Also, I knew that it was coming from him as a marker. Even if I hadn't known him as a person, I don't think – I think it still would have been valuable. (F2-Penny)

Furthermore, whilst the literature reports increased efficiency for markers utilising EAF when compared with written feedback, the authors' research suggests that the audio feedback format had the *opposite* impact for students: it compelled the individual receiving the feedback to listen to the recording at the pace dictated by the marker's voice recording. One student noted that she felt students who receive EAF are 'far more likely to give that feedback the "time of day" and sit down and really learn from whatever that response was' (F2-Penny).

It must be noted this enforced slowing down to receive assessment feedback during the EAF Project was likely assisted by the multimodal nature of the feedback. The EAF general (summative) comment was provided alongside components of the standard form(s) of written feedback that the students ordinarily receive – namely, in-text/in-line comments on the pages of their submission and an overall grade. M3-Chris described his own movement between these multiple modes of feedback in a way that demonstrates at least two periods of listening to the three-minute comment:

I didn't take notes [while listening to the audio recording]. I listened to it initially, just like passively listened to it as I scrolled through my assignment and sort of picked out where [the marker] was making mention of things. I would have listened to it at least once again without doing that flicking through and looking for written comments or looking for bits within the text that he was referring to.

F2-Penny also described the process of switching between the multiple modes of feedback in real time and its effect of slowing down and re-pacing the reception and processing of feedback:

[...] I had to sit there and listen at the pace of the person providing the feedback and let that sink in while I was able to examine my essay and read that while listening, and there is something about those two modes happening at once that worked really nicely; they complemented each other.

The audio nature of the feedback also meant that the students described the need to engage with it both in real time and in more private circumstances than they might otherwise do or prefer to do. For example, M3-Leon reflected on his receipt of EAF as preventing him from fully engaging with it on the bus:

Personally, I kind of like written feedback [...] the thing is, you have to listen to [audio feedback] in its entirety. Whereas I find that with written feedback, I can read it if I'm on the bus, if I'm going somewhere. Whereas oral feedback, you want to make sure you have a headset on if you're in your office for example, if you don't want people to be disturbed by it. Whereas written feedback, you can read it anytime, anywhere. But that's just me.

Despite this challenge, another student noted, 'I did like that it was more conversational, and I know personally [...] if I'm trying to convey something, having a chat with someone is often far easier than trying to reduce it to an email or [...] formal [written] communication' (M3-Chris).

3 *Electronic Audio Feedback Is Generally Highly Specific and Detailed*

The interaction between a personalised audio comment and the potential for 'recycling' commentary and marking comments was a frequent theme in interviews. The students presented a detailed understanding (or, at least, an imagining) of the marking process, reflecting on differences in feedback style, content and practice they discerned (or imagined) between hardcopy and electronic marking. This included sustained reflections on the affordances of different modes of providing feedback, especially in terms of the quantum of comments, uniqueness of comments, detail of feedback and how marking might be completed, and commentary produced by different modes of reviewing assessable work.

The students frequently identified and reflected on the potential for markers to use pre-written comments on electronic submissions (particularly 'quick marks' in Turnitin), and the negative impact these forms of assessment feedback had on their level of engagement with the comments provided. One student, F2-Penny, referred to an 'urban myth' that markers/examiners have 'three different comments that they copy and paste' onto each assessment task regardless of whether the assessment is 'good, really bad or it's all right':

I feel like with the electronic feedback, instead of it just being a written assessment of someone's work, because it was sort of longer and more in depth, they had to engage with my own specific structure, my writing style. It very much felt tailored to me, that comment. Not just generally, didn't meet that marking criteria, didn't perform here well. Whereas, yeah, it was more specific and it was, it felt more sincere because it was really responsive to my individual work and it tracks that in a linear way. That was another thing that I liked.

The interview data suggest the receipt of feedback in modes which do not allow for (or attempt) personalised feedback is a common experience for students. In particular, the students resented or discounted Turnitin's quick marks or other pre-prepared comments whereas, when a voice comment was 'anchored' to a generalised or quick mark comment, students felt better supported to understand their purpose and to pay attention to the important information contained therein. In support of his call for EAF to 'be used more' widely and consistently in the law faculty, M3-Chris reported:

I think that for some of the subjects that I've done where there's been just the mark presented as feedback, and generic feedback sent out to everyone, for example, in a larger cohort, something like this is also perhaps an easier way for the feedback to be delivered. So something that's a 30-second clip for every student is perhaps easier than having to type out comments for the lot of us. So I can see it being beneficial to academics, but certainly it was beneficial to me to receive it, so I think it's definitely worthwhile to be rolled out.

Here, then, the mode of feedback – in its electronic audio form – is seen as an essential element of ensuring feedback is personal and personalised. The features of the audio form of feedback which appear to have led to this 'personalised feedback experience' for students are twofold: first, that a bespoke comment *must* be recorded for each student's assessment, and second, the personalised *nature* and *content* of the feedback itself:

Yes [the EAF] did [feel more personal], definitely. It felt as though [...] because sometimes, I mean, you get comments and then you compare it with your friends and they get an identical comment. And you think, did you just copy-paste me? Or like, is it actually directly relevant to me?

And the fact that [the marker] could, like, pull out a sentence of my essay and say, well this sentence was a bit odd, you could have fixed it this way or you could do this to it, made it definitely more personalised. (F3-Petra)

Part of this seeming contrast between good and poor-quality feedback appeared to be facilitated by the feedback being delivered to the students in an audio mode:

Whereas a written comment is quite sort of anonymous in a way, half of the time I won't know who has marked my essay and there has been four senior markers that have divided up the law papers according to last names or whatever but this way, it just felt like I was really having someone sustain their attention and give me an individually tailored response.

With other assessment feedback, you'll often find that you don't.... You can't see what the comment is regarding until you do click on it and so you'll have five comments. It'll have [a] sort of feedback on the work itself and then maybe fifteen that are just fixing up bibliography mistakes and sort of stuff like that [inaudible] crap to review and useless, really, I think in review. But I guess the [...] when it was the oral feedback, I think I was receiving sort of more [...] even maybe get a positive and a negative within the one comment and it'd also offer improvement.

Yes, and I think obviously with feedback it's [...] with feedback on each comment, when it's written you can't get too much information out because

obviously it's going to be limited in what you can say if you're going to be putting ten points in an assignment. But I think you could probably get more out per point in the oral feedback. (M2-George)

C Challenges of Electronic Audio Feedback for Students

Despite the clear advantages of providing assessment feedback for students in electronic audio format, the interview data analysis also identified several challenges. Some relate to the provision of feedback in general, and thus also feature in EAF (general challenges). Other challenges identified during the EAF Project appear to be related specifically to the provision of feedback in electronic audio form (specific challenges).

1 Assessment Feedback: General Challenges

The general challenges of assessment feedback noted by the students were largely reflections on the nature of assessment feedback quality, content and style. These challenges arose in relation to the provision of EAF, however, and are not specific or unique to that mode; rather, they reflect common issues or practices in relation to all feedback provision and use.

(a) Constructiveness of Assessment Feedback

One of the students interviewed reflected on the fundamental requirement for feedback that is 'constructive and specifies what you need to focus on':

I mean, I would prefer it [the assessment feedback] written, but if it comes orally because it means they can say more, then, yeah, I mean, I would listen to it. But it definitely needs that second part of what you just said in that a way of improving that is – it's giving feedback that's just comments, and then there's giving feedback that's constructive and specifies what you need to focus in on. (F2-Elizabeth)

EAF provided a cue to students that the marker truly engaged with their assessment in a detailed fashion. This does not mean to say that markers who utilised written commentary failed to engage directly and in depth with an assessment; rather, it seems that EAF more effectively signals to students that this had happened. Comments that are too general or not constructive will be unhelpful when delivered in either mode. More specific to oral comments, they too are susceptible to this flaw, and therefore, the content of the feedback must also be considered.

(b) Nature and Scope of Assessment Feedback in Law

Another general issue with assessment feedback that the students raised during the interviews relates to the nature of assessment feedback, specifically in the discipline of law. Several students undertaking double degrees noted the disparity, for example, between the nature and extent of feedback in law units in comparison to the nature and extent of assessment feedback in their non-law subjects. One student noted that her experience with assessment feedback in law had been largely confined to receiving marks alone:

But aside from that [single experience of EAF] I've never had any.... Not even like ticks or crosses. Just a mark usually. (F2-Robyn)

So they're going to give you a mark and they kind of need to explain why they've given the mark otherwise, since everyone who hands in the assessment might think their mark's really good, and if they don't back it up with evidence as to why it's bad, then they need to write what the feedback [...] like what needs [...] why they're giving that mark. I think you can't just give someone a two out of ten and not explain yourself, I think. Like, everyone deserves a bit of explanation given how much time they've put into it. (F2-Hanna)

(c) *Timeliness of Assessment Feedback*

During the interviews, the students regularly noted difficulties surrounding the timely provision of assessment feedback. Although almost all students interviewed expressed acute awareness of the size of student cohorts, and the attendant difficulties facing markers in providing comprehensive feedback to every student in a timely manner, they reported that delays in receiving assessment feedback created obstacles to the use of feedback for future assignments – especially within units: 'Sometimes I get a great feedback, I understand my errors, like what's good.... It was a full feedback, comprehensive, it helped me for the final exam. Whereas in some subjects, it's pretty light, almost non-existent. It depends' (M3-Theodore). This theme is consistent with the findings of contemporary literature.⁴⁰ Lunt and Curran in particular suggest that EAF may mitigate this issue by reducing the time resources required for markers to provide students with personalised, actionable assessment feedback.⁴¹

However, not all students found assessment feedback timeliness to be problematic. A number of students expressed that once assignments are complete, they prefer not to dwell on them any further, even when feedback is provided at a later date. For example, as F1-Carolyn noted, 'Once [the assessment is] done, I kind of just, like, wanna move on to the next thing.'

(d) *Use of Assessment Feedback: Triangulation versus Improvement*

The provision of audio feedback during the EAF Project brought out (or highlighted) the use of feedback in a variety of modes. For example, F3-Petra, a final year JD student, spoke about different uses of feedback and associated motivations for those practices:

Yes, [students] definitely [use feedback] for both [improvement and to 'find out how they did']. I think [...] and that would have been very specific to [the subject] because I really liked the subject and I wanted to do well. And I wanted to improve. I do not know that if this [had] been for something of [...] something different I would have...I would not have maybe taken it so seriously. But with this [...] yes, I wanted it to be better. And I wanted to learn for the next one. Yes.

⁴⁰ Lunt and Curran (n 12); Bourgault, Mundy and Joshua (n 12); Carruthers et al (n 13).

⁴¹ Lunt and Curran (n 12) 759, 761.

[...] I get very determined when there is something that I want to do well in. When there is something that I like. And Justice was one of those subjects that I just liked...I had to do well for whatever reason. Yes.

F3-Petra's approach can be contrasted with that of F1-Carolyn, who expressed that she engages with assessment feedback primarily from a sense of 'obligation':

I just looked at [the feedback], like, out of obligation kind of thing....

Yeah. Well, I, like, kind of, like, just, like, heard what it had to say and then kind of, like, tried to absorb what I could and kind of just moved on from that assessment. I don't like to, like [...] I don't like thinking about them for too long.

These extracts show that students approach and use feedback in a variety of ways depending on their learning approaches and goal orientation.

2 *Electronic Audio Feedback: Specific Challenges*

Few challenges relating solely or specifically to the provision of feedback in electronic audio mode were identified during the EAF Project. However, some students expressed a preference for written feedback:

I mean, I would prefer it [the assessment feedback] written, but if it comes orally because it means they can say more, then, yeah, I mean, I would listen to it. (F2-Elizabeth)

I don't know if they would have a preference. Some people would probably find it easier to look at that written comment and have it written down because you can refer back to it. Whereas electronic feedback, you have to listen to it kind of thing. (F2-Penny)

Another challenge that EAF presented was the inability to readily see and skim feedback in the same fashion as one could for a written comment. To access the audio feedback in a public setting, students required access to an audio receptive device (eg, headphones) to enable the private reception of feedback. M3-Leon, a final semester JD student, reflected on the difficulty of accessing audio feedback or parts of it, especially when it is of a long duration:

I feel like audio feedback, it's good but, if you want to see a couple of points that.... Sometimes there might be an audio feedback of ten minutes, but you might have gotten the first eight minutes of it, but you just want to get the last two minutes or something. And then you have to kind of find the right spot where you listened to that particular part of the feedback. Whereas if it's like a point form, let's say like bullet points of three things that you need to improve on, and if it's the last point that you're trying to focus on, you can always go back to that last point and re-read the feedback on that, and improve on it. Whereas audio feedback, I just feel like as if you have to start from scratch to listen to it and find that right time, and then keep replaying that portion of it, which is a bit frustrating at times.

VI CONCLUSION

The EAF Project was conducted to ascertain whether electronic audio assessment feedback could lessen the time taken to give students feedback while also improving their pedagogical outcomes. The study suggests that the relatively straightforward incorporation of spoken summative feedback into the overall feedback provided to students influenced how they perceived and engaged with assessment feedback. The use of electronic audio assessment feedback during the EAF Project elicited an overwhelmingly positive response from the students. The research interviews found that the students experienced EAF as constructive, helpful and personalised – and as offering greater clarity and detail – when compared with student experiences of written feedback. Of particular significance to researchers concerned with the interaction between feedback, student wellbeing and student retention in tertiary education is the finding that the thoughtful provision of EAF may ‘cushion the blow’ of otherwise affronting – and potentially demotivating – assessor comments. The project’s findings also suggest that EAF may drive a more sustained, active engagement with feedback than its written alternative. From a resource perspective, the EAF Project found that assessor time and effort involved in the production of EAF were, on average, significantly reduced when compared with its more traditional, written counterpart. A single three-minute voice recording provided a vastly increased quantum and detail of feedback compared with the standard practice of summative and/or in-line comments.

This EAF Pilot has contributed to the literature on the provision of effective assessment feedback in tertiary education. It has also opened new avenues for inquiry. First, the interviews identified that students reproduce ‘stock stories’ about written feedback, which may be real or imagined. These include that written feedback in the form of pre-prepared comments is commonly reproduced by academic staff, and that assessors allocate insufficient time to the provision of feedback. An implication of this finding is the significant value students place on personalised feedback. In addition, it reveals a lack of student insight into the significant time commonly taken by tertiary assessors to give feedback. A question that arises from this finding is how it might be possible to disrupt prevalent student myths around the quality of and time allocated to the provision of assessment feedback. The second line of inquiry relates to the finding that written feedback retains a number of advantages over audio feedback: it can be easier to skim, navigate and access, particularly in public settings. Based on these findings, the authors suggest that the preferred mode of feedback for students, particularly in a first-year tertiary legal education setting, which requires the provision of detailed assessment feedback, may be multimodal (both written and oral). This presents the challenge of ascertaining how technology might be employed to deliver multimodal feedback in an efficient and effective manner. For example, the integration of transcription software into assessment feedback practices

to translate oral comments to written ones could better cater to a greater variety of learning approaches and accessibility requirements.