The Imperative of Timely Pedagogical Feedback: A Catalyst for Sustainable Educational Reform and Human Capital Development in Sierra Leone's Higher Education Sector

Mohamed Suffian Kamara[1], Emmanuel Dumbuya[2*], James Saysay Kanu[3]

[1]M.Ed., B.Ed., H.T.C(Sec),T.C, Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology Sierra Leone

[2]M.Ed., B.Ed., Njala University

[3]M.Ed., B.Ed., DAE, CAE, H.T.C(Primary), T.C Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology Sierra Leone

[*]Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

Timely pedagogical feedback transcends its traditional role of informing students of grades; it functions as a critical systemic mechanism that shapes learning trajectories, fortifies institutional integrity, and guides national education policy. Grounded in established learning and curriculum theory, this paper argues that prompt, actionable feedback is a non-negotiable prerequisite for multi-level accountability and development, encompassing student metacognition, lecturer reflexivity, and administrative quality assurance. Drawing specifically on the resource-constrained context of Sierra Leone's higher education (HE) system, this analysis delineates the systemic costs of delayed feedback and proposes a concrete framework for cultural and structural reform. The core recommendation is the mandatory, timely return of marked scripts to students, repositioning feedback from a post-assessment ritual to an active pedagogical instrument for human capital development. This approach aligns with recent scholarship emphasizing feedback literacy and digital feedback mechanisms as essential for enhancing student agency (Winstone & Nash, 2023; Liu et al., 2025).

Keywords: Timely Feedback; Pedagogical Feedback; Higher Education Reform; Sierra Leone; Human Capital Development; Feedback Literacy; Quality Assurance; Assessment for Learning; Formative Assessment; Sub-Saharan Africa.

INTRODUCTION: FEEDBACK AS A SYSTEMIC REFORM LEVER

The efficacy of educational processes is fundamentally predicated on the immediacy and quality of feedback. The delay in providing students with assignment comments, course grades, or examination results in higher education is not a mere logistical inconvenience; it represents a significant structural failure that compromises the quality and momentum of learning. The concept of education as a continuous process demands that the link between effort and outcome must be rapidly reinforced to prevent the loss of learning momentum (Dewey, 1938).

In Sierra Leone, the higher education sector is marked by the dual challenges of post-conflict recovery and the increasing demand generated by the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) initiative. To translate mass access into tangible quality, a core structural reform is needed. Recent research globally has shifted the focus from merely providing feedback to fostering student **feedback literacy**—the ability to read, understand, and act on feedback (Winstone & Carless, 2020; Ilie, 2024). This paper asserts that embedding a culture of timely, developmental feedback serves as this critical leverage point, driving quality and equity across the HE system.

This analysis moves beyond the conventional student-lecturer dynamic to explore the necessity of timely feedback from six critical, often-overlooked angles, framing feedback as a **systemic regulatory action** (Fyfe et al., 2023).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A POST-2020 SYNTHESIS

This critique is anchored in key theoretical constructs, updated with contemporary scholarship:

- **Formative Assessment and Timeliness (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Black & Wiliam, 1998):** Feedback is most powerful when it is timely, specific, and actionable, enabling students to correct errors and adjust learning strategies before the next summative assessment. Delayed feedback degrades its formative potential to a purely summative function. Empirical studies strongly support that immediate feedback—especially via digital channels—significantly improves cognitive skills and satisfaction (Afify, 2025).

- **Feedback Literacy and Student Agency (Winstone & Carless, 2020):** This modern paradigm emphasizes that students must be active participants in the feedback loop. Timeliness is crucial for developing metacognitive skills (e.g., self-monitoring and self-evaluation), which are essential for academic success (Dweck, 2020).

- **Affective Dimension of Feedback (Liu et al., 2025; Rani, 2025):** New research highlights the psychological safety aspect. Timely, personalized, and emotionally intelligent feedback significantly reduces assessment-related anxiety and fosters student motivation and wellbeing, repositioning feedback as a developmental, not judgmental, mechanism.

- **Constructive Alignment (Biggs, 1999):** Feedback remains the essential linkage between intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment tasks. Institutional failure to manage this process in a timely manner signifies a breakdown in the entire 'alignment' and quality assurance loop.

THE MULTI-STAKEHOLDER NECESSITY OF TIMELY FEEDBACK

Student Metacognition and Self-Regulation Prompt feedback is fundamental to developing **self-regulated learning**—the capacity for students to manage their own learning process (Panadero & Broadbent, 2020). Timeliness ensures that the feedback is utilized effectively, which is the core metric of feedback success (Fyfe et al., 2023). When feedback is delayed, students are more likely to disengage or repeat the same mistakes, directly contradicting the goal of fostering independence. Studies indicate the ideal turnaround time for complex assignments is 5–10 working days (ResearchGate, 2025).

Lecturer Reflexivity and Pedagogical Renewal The provision of feedback acts as an **input for pedagogical adjustment**. When lecturers provide feedback quickly, they receive immediate, diagnostic data on teaching efficacy, allowing for **reflection-in-action** (Schön, 1983). Furthermore, training in delivering feedback (e.g., focusing on a coaching style over a judgmental one) is critical to maximizing its impact and is a necessary component of modern academic professional development (Pitt & Quinlan, 2022).

Administrative Accountability and Quality Assurance From the institutional perspective, feedback turnaround time (TAT) is a quantifiable Key Performance Indicator (KPI) of academic quality. The failure to provide timely feedback exposes institutions to scrutiny, a persistent issue cited even in relatively well-resourced contexts in Africa (Dlamini, 2024; ResearchGate, 2025). Structured, trackable feedback systems—especially those enabled by digital tools—provide the necessary data for internal **performance monitoring** and external accreditation processes.

The Role of Digital and AI-Assisted Mechanisms The integration of digital learning environments (DLEs) offers a critical solution to the timeliness challenge in contexts like Sierra Leone. DLEs allow for:

- **Faster Delivery:** Overcoming logistical and distance barriers (TEQSA, 2022).

- **Personalization:** AI-assisted tools can provide immediate and personalized feedback on preliminary drafts, freeing up lecturer time for more complex, in-depth final commentary (Al-Amin et al., 2024; Illinois, 2024).

- **Enhanced Dialogue:** Digital platforms facilitate dialogic feedback loops, moving the process from a one-way transmission to a sustained conversation (Hill & West, 2020).

CONSEQUENCES OF SYSTEMIC FEEDBACK FAILURE (REVISED TO ADDRESS QUANTITATIVE CONCERN)

The failure to enforce timely and high-quality feedback carries significant negative systemic consequences:

- **Quantifiable Economic and Human Capital Costs:** The prolonged learning cycle due to delayed feedback represents a measurable drag on human capital formation, slowing the rate at which graduates develop necessary competencies. **Future studies are vital to quantify these costs (e.g., in terms of student retention rates, time-to-competency, and subsequent labor market readiness) to strengthen policy advocacy efforts.**
- **Psychological Distress:** Students experience heightened anxiety, frustration, and feelings of neglect when systems are opaque and slow (Liu et al., 2025; Afify, 2025).
- **Erosion of Institutional Trust:** The lack of promptness fuels student dissatisfaction and public cynicism about the true quality and accountability of HE institutions in Sierra Leone.

ACTIONABLE FRAMEWORK FOR FEEDBACK REFORM (EXPANDED FOR IMPLEMENTATION DETAIL)

A practical, high-impact reform focuses on embedding a transparent feedback loop, leveraging technology where possible.

Mandatory Return of Marked Scripts: The Transparency Mandate The most direct, high-impact reform is the institutional mandate to return marked examination scripts and coursework to students with substantive, actionable comments. This practice, often lacking in African HE (ResearchGate, 2025), promotes ultimate transparency and empowers students to directly assess their errors. This must be coupled with:

- **Enforceable TAT:** A maximum of 10–14 working days for all formative and summative assignments (ResearchGate, 2025).
- **Focus on 'Feedforward':** Comments must be designed not merely to judge past work, but to direct future improvement (Pitt & Quinlan, 2022).

Institutional Preparedness and Digital Barriers (New Section) While digital integration offers speed, its adoption in Sierra Leone requires acknowledging and addressing significant challenges:

- **Resource Constraints:** Reform implementation must be phased, prioritizing training and policy over immediate, large-scale hardware investment. Initial efforts should leverage existing mobile technologies and basic Learning Management System (LMS) features.
- **Capacity Building:** Resistance from academic staff—due to workload concerns or lack of digital skills—is a primary barrier. Implementation requires mandatory, sustained, and funded professional development focused on the practical use of DLEs for feedback.
- **Pilot Project Requirement:** To gather crucial practical lessons, new digital feedback policies must be introduced through small-scale pilot projects within willing departments before mandatory institutional rollout.

Developing Feedback Literacy and Affective Competence (New Section) Sustainable reform hinges on changing cultural practice, requiring specific training for all stakeholders:

- **Lecturer Training:** Professional development must include training in **feedback literacy** (how to deliver effective, clear feedback) and managing the **affective dimension** (how to provide sensitive, developmental, and non-judgmental commentary).
- **Student Training:** Orientations must include explicit instruction on how to *read*, *interpret*, and *act* on feedback, shifting them from passive recipients to active partners in the learning process.
- **Stakeholder Consultation:** Policy development should be collaborative, involving academic staff, student union representatives, and administration to ensure buy-in and address contextual implementation barriers specific to each institution.

CONCLUSION

Timely pedagogical feedback is the engine of quality, equity, and student success. For a nation like Sierra Leone, striving for educational excellence and inclusive national development, embedding a culture of timely, actionable, and digitally-enabled feedback is not merely an administrative task—it is a vital strategic intervention in human capital formation. By committing to the Transparency Mandate of returning marked work promptly, supporting lecturers with modern feedback literacy training, and navigating implementation barriers through phased, consulted rollout, the HE sector can transition into a dynamic, responsive learning environment, truly serving as a catalyst for sustainable national progress.

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