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Citation:

Sutcliffe, R and Linfield, R and Geldart, RA (2015) Overcoming Assessment Challenges - Tipping the Balance. In: 5th International Assessment in Higher Education Conference, 24th - 25th June 2015, Birmingham. (Unpublished)

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# Overcoming Assessment Challenges - Tipping the Balance

Ruth Sutcliffe, Rachel Linfield and Ros Geldart

## Introduction

It is well known to primary teachers that effective assessment of children requires a multi-faceted approach (Linfield 1994). Equally, written feedback on a piece of work is often not understood by the pupils themselves (Linfield, 1995). Arguably, as one proceeds through secondary and tertiary education, this situation changes little, with the best attempts to set ‘perfect’ assessments and give effective qualitative feedback, still leading to misinterpretation by students. It is also true that students often do not always recognise what is meant by the term ‘feedback’ and have difficulty in interpreting and understanding the feedback that they receive, even with the most careful and targeted advice in advance. (Sutcliffe et al 2014)

In 2010 the National Union of Students released a ‘Charter for Assessment and Feedback’ which outlined ten principles for effective assessment and feedback. Despite this charter, the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2014 still showed twenty-eight percent of students were not satisfied. *“Assessment and feedback was again rated the lowest by students, with just seventy-two percent saying they were satisfied with this, the same level as last year.”* (Grove 2014)

To Tutors, this may feel like Figure 1

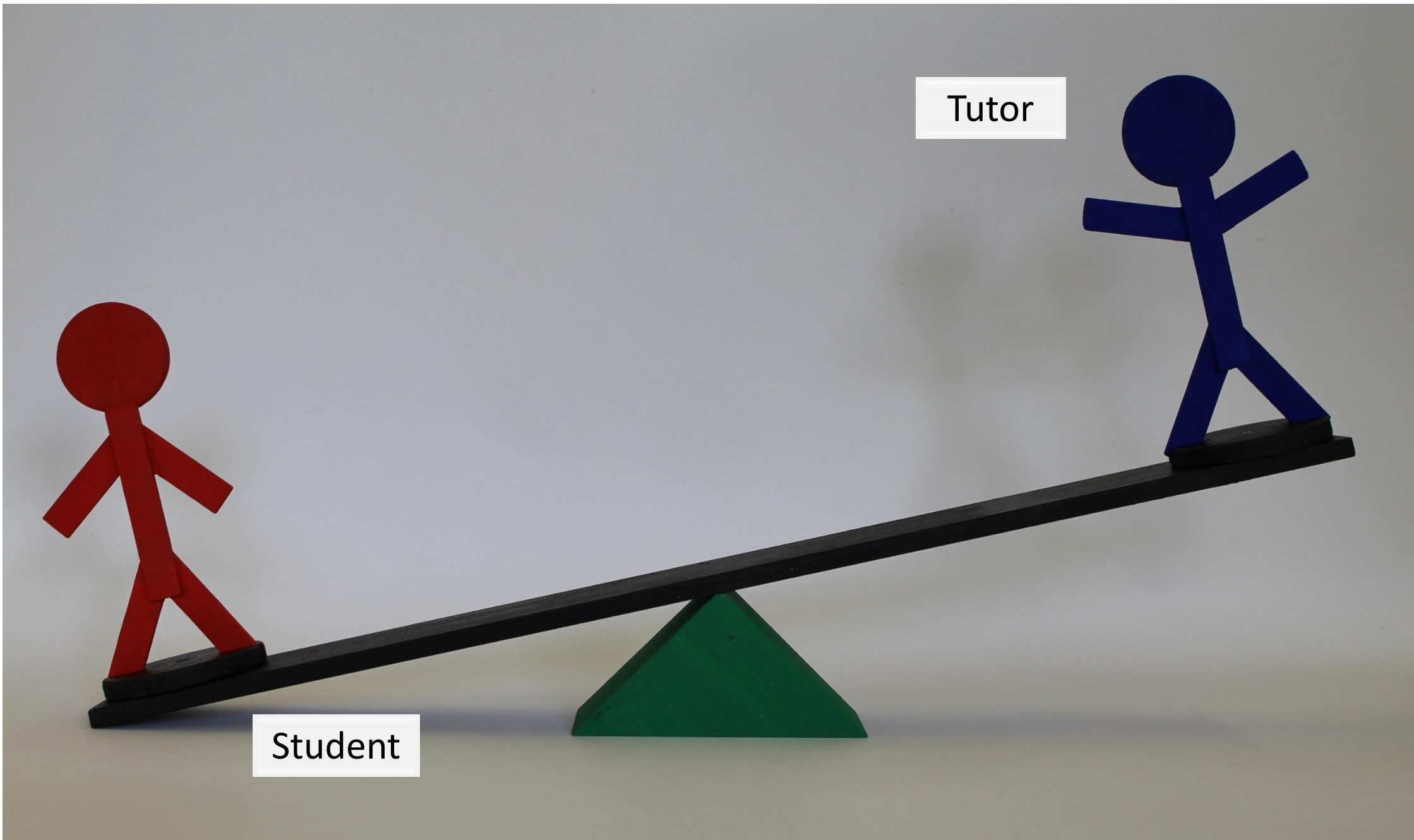


Figure 1

## So what can be done to enable effective assessment and feedback? Can we ‘tip the balance’?

	Aspects of feedback received on the course as a whole that has been helpful in clarifying things I did not understand	Aspects of feedback that has been less helpful
Written	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Written feedback referring specifically to my own work</li><li>Written feedback is something you can keep going over – found very useful</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Written feedback – I just skim through it</li></ul>
Critique	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Clear and thought out critique that pinpoints mistakes.</li><li>Annotations for written work</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>I would like to know how I can improve more, rather than just where I went wrong</li><li>When it’s not specific enough - says what to improve, not how</li><li>Words such as ‘reflect’, ‘critically evaluate’, ‘wide reading’</li><li>[Quantity of feedback]<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>I would prefer a whole page dedicated on how to improve.</li><li>I would like to be told in detail how I could improve</li></ul></li></ul>
Spoken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Personal sessions with tutors where written feedback can be verbally explained</li><li>Actually speaking to the teacher about a particular piece of written work</li><li>Sessions where lecturers have answered any questions or misunderstandings positively and taken the time to help me</li><li>Formative feedback on drafts</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Tutorials</li><li>Don’t like to be forced to go to tutorials if I don’t feel like I need feedback</li><li>Very simple and blunt replies (to emails) and during tutorials</li></ul>
Peer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Peer assessment – we can compare what we have done with others and collect ideas</li><li>Class group discussions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Peer assessments</li><li>Peer to peer – feedback not detailed/ consistent /accurate</li></ul>

Table 1: What the students said

## Discussion

Analysis of questionnaires included polarised views about what constitutes helpful feedback and showed that many students appreciated the chance to discuss feedback and raise queries. Of particular concern was a lack of perception by students of their own roles and responsibilities within the assessment/feedback cycle as well as a ‘notion of readiness’ to process both assignment guidance and later, related feedback. (Figure 2)

## Conclusions – Tipping the balance

The pilot study demonstrated that students did not necessarily have an understanding of key terminology linked to assignments and assessment criteria. Clearly, careful scaffolding of assessment procedures, including student and tutor responsibilities within the cycle, needs to be explored early in a degree, revisited and consolidated throughout the programme.

The research also reflected that where students considered feedback to be effective, face-to-face interaction with tutors was a key component. This enables questions to be raised and misunderstandings to be quickly addressed, before and during assignment completion, and after receiving summative feedback.

Universities have work to do to show students that feedback is not something that is simply received, but needs student interaction and engagement. For the higher education sector to move forwards, and for students to maximise their potential, we need to tip this balance of tutor and student support/engagement. It is clear that for many students there is a lack of understanding of both their role and that of the tutor within the assessment cycle.

In some ways these conclusions seem obvious. Yet pleasingly they are within our grasp. We can ‘tip the balance’ if students take an increased role and responsibility in the assessment and engagement cycle. However, the illustration for this is not polar ends of the balance shown in Figure 1 but one with tutor and student at the centre (Figure 3). Here relative roles and responsibilities come together. It is through shared responsibility, engagement and reflective practice, through all stages of the ‘Student and Tutor Engagement in the Feedback Cycle’ (Figure 2) that assessment challenges are likely to be overcome.

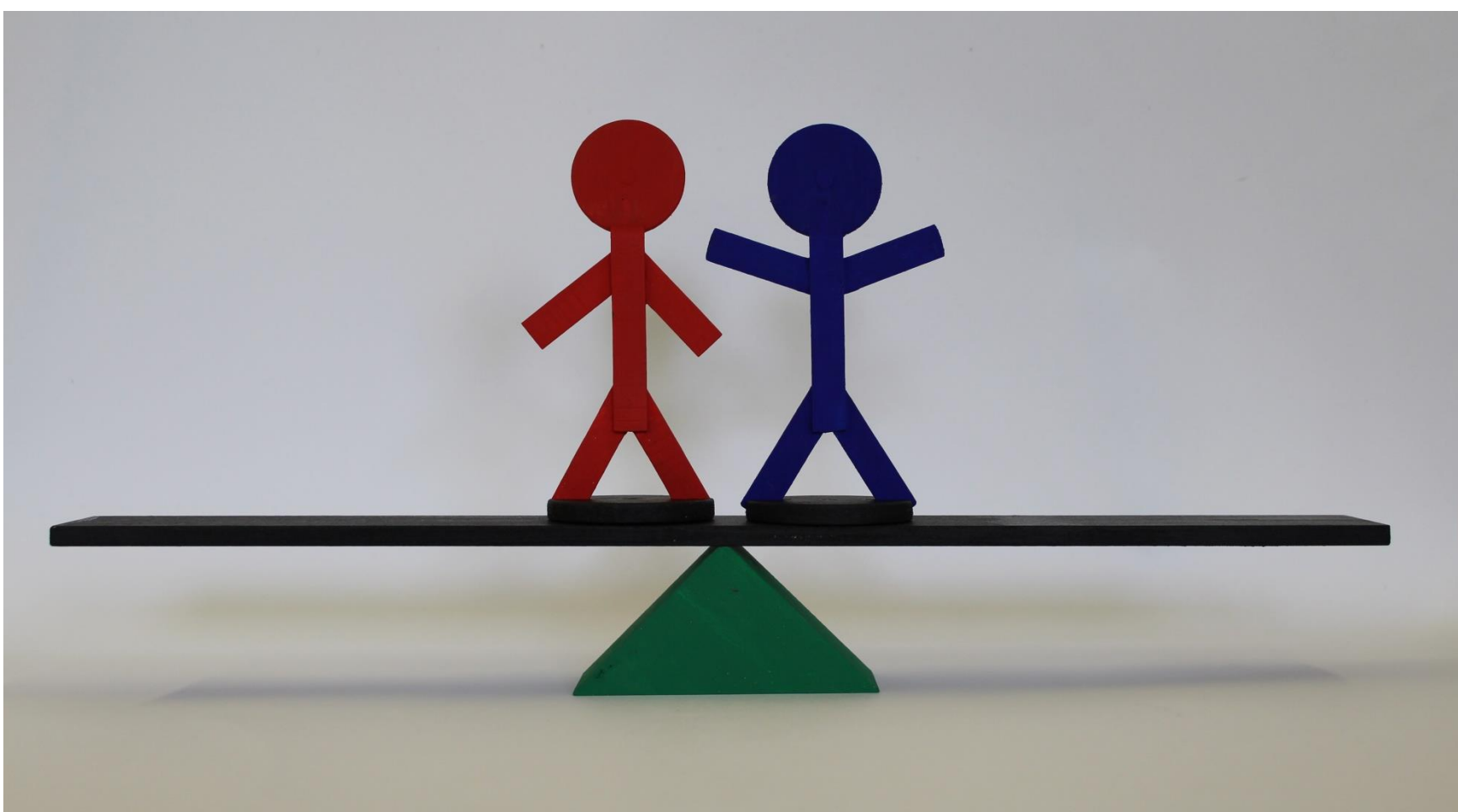


Figure 3

## The Research

A pilot study in September 2014 invited a Year 2 cohort of 96 students on a BA (Hons) Primary Education course to complete a questionnaire exploring views on feedback on assessment they found ‘helpful in clarifying things [they] did not understand,’ (HEFCE, 2014)

Analysis of questionnaires revealed that, despite a diverse set of views, 75% students were satisfied with the feedback they had received in Year 1, (see Table 1).

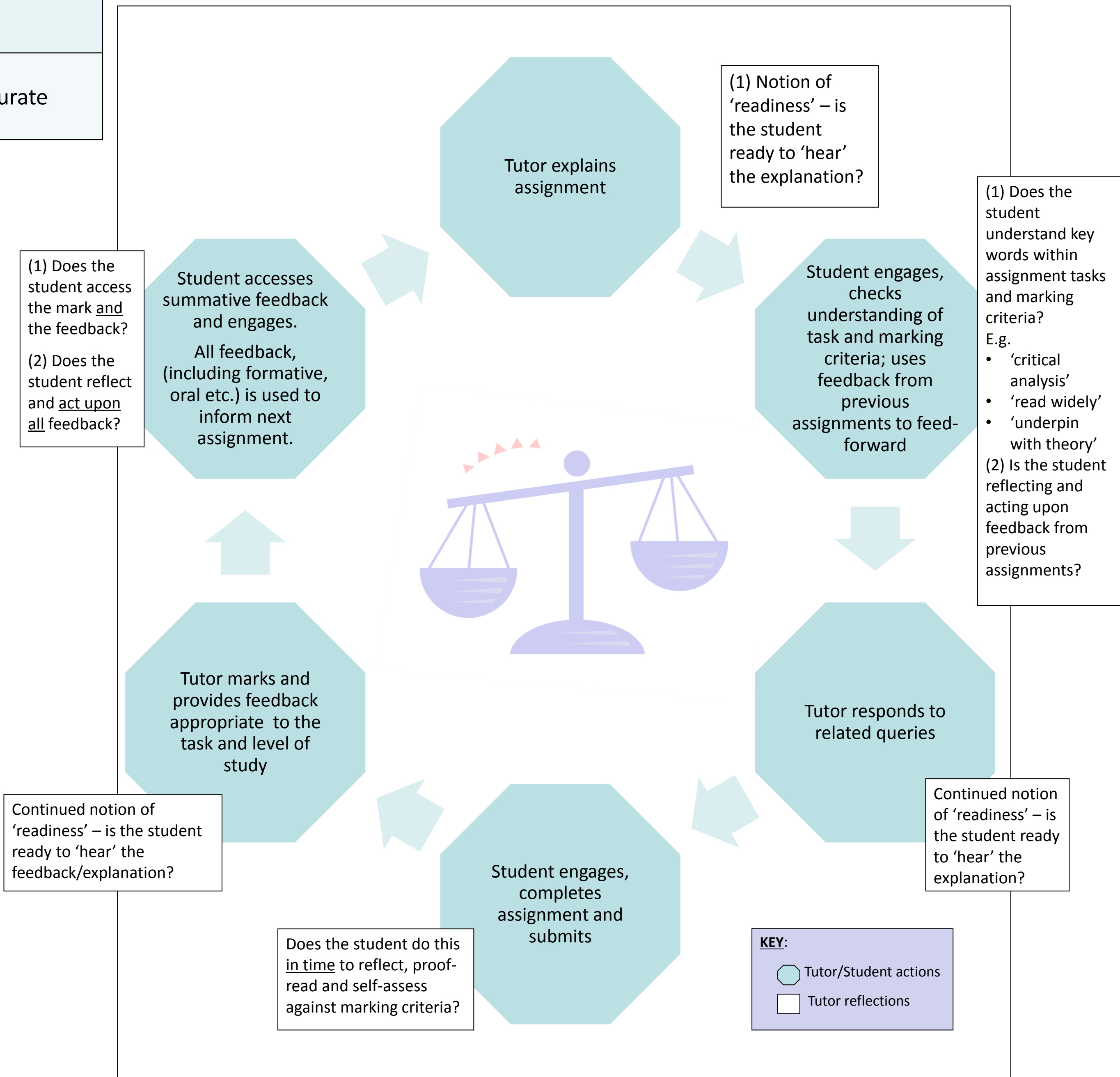


Figure 2 Responsibilities for Student and Tutor Engagement in the Feedback Cycle

## References and Further Reading

References:  
Grove, J. (2014) 'National Student Survey 2014 results show record levels of satisfaction' accessed on 30.11.14 <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/national-student-survey-2014-results-show-record-levels-of-satisfaction/2015108> article  
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Further Reading:  
Hepplestone, S. and Chikwa, G. (2014) 'Understanding how Students process and use feedback to support their learning' *Practitioner Research in Higher Education* 8(1)  
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### Acknowledgements

This work is supported from the Carnegie Staff Development Fund  
Thanks are given to Year 2 Students on the Primary Education BA Hons (with QTS) degree at Leeds Beckett University for participating in the research.  
Thanks are also given to Ian Crossland and Kevin Williams for the 'balance' photographs'.