Sharing Practice on Framing Feedback Around Student Development

What does the article investigate?
A key aspect of learning is receiving actionable feedback that allows students to develop their knowledge and graduate skills. Despite the fact that most staff and students are highly invested in the feedback process, students regularly comment on it with dissatisfaction. The authors suggest ways teachers might offer fewer comments, which are more targeted and actionable, to allow students to develop the knowledge and skills we value.

The authors aim to share good practice and offer three suggestions for teaching and learning:

1. Will the student resubmit the assignment?
For most assignments students have no opportunity to resubmit an improved version. Feedback is more effective, therefore, if instead of being a comment on current work, which the teacher hopes the student will be able to apply, it helps students develop an action plan for future work.

2. At what stage is the student in your programme?
Feedback can focus on either the fine details (e.g. spelling, grammar, referencing) or the global aspects (e.g. structure, building arguments). While both matter if we mix them together in one document students fixate on the task-specific details as they can be quickly comprehended. This discourages engagement in the meta-cognitive processes of transferring their skills to new types of assessment and new domain knowledge. We need to gradually shift our feedback from comments on task-specific finer details to comments on the general process in order to help students focus on the most important aspect, at different points in their learning, that will help shape their future work.

3. How will a student make use of the feedback?
Students often say that they understand the feedback comments, but don't know how to action them. Adding more comments to an assignment is only effective for early development or for formative assignments (see above) and may prove demotivating. Better to keep the comments about the current work more general and instead make the comments for future work more specific – highlighting what was good and demonstrating how it could be improved in the next assignment. The goal is to give more effective comments by framing feedback as actionable points around student development.

Feedback is a two-way street. We need to stress the importance of making use of it through reflection (we can model reflective practices) and obtaining further feedback through discussion with staff.