**"It gave me so much faith in myself"**: University Students' Experiences of Agency in Summative Teacher-centered Assessment Feedback Practices in Higher education

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**ABSTRACT**

*Strengthening the agency of higher education students is one of the key objectives of higher education. Research has shown that the agency of higher education students can be significantly strengthened through different types of assessment feedback practices. However, the role of assessment feedback in strengthening the student's agency is not fully understood in practice. While formative, student-centred feedback practices are becoming more common, summative, end-of-course, teacher-centred feedback practices are still prevalent in higher education. This study seeks to address the research gap of how university students perceive their agency to be constructed in the context of teacher-centred summative written and audio feedback. From these premises, the research question was designed: what kind of agency emerges from students' experiences of summative assessment feedback? The study was conducted as a qualitative online survey for university students (N=35) in Finland. The data was analysed by means of qualitative systematic data driven content analysis. According to the results, students perceive the summative assessment feedback they receive from their teachers as a reflection of their own agency and how it is shaped. In the light of the assessment practices examined, students' agency was found to be reflexive, contradictory and incomplete. The results show that the recognition of the relationship between student agency and assessment feedback in higher education is important but still less well recognised. The results of this study are relevant for the development of assessment feedback practices that sustainably promote the construction of student agency in the context of lifelong learning and digitalisation of teaching in higher education.*

**Keywords:** assessment feedback, agency, university student, higher education

European education policy aims to involve all individuals in lifelong learning and to provide equal access to education and training for all (European Union, 2018). At the same time, empowering individuals has been identified as a key objective of higher education policy (OECD, 2019). As a result, the importance of agency has been reinforced and given new concrete definitions as lifelong learning has become stronger and the skills needed in the world of work have also changed rapidly (Morrish, 2017; Lauder & Mayhew, 2020). Today, agency is seen as a key component of professional development (Goller & Paloniemi, 2017), for example, and as a builder of meaningful careers and personal well-being (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Individuals are expected to act in ways that imply sustainable choices despite the constant and unpredictable changes in working life (Hays &Reinders, 2020). Based on the choices made and the opportunities available, individuals should build their life course in a meaningful way at the intersection of work, family life, education, and lifelong learning (Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

Agency has taken on different meanings. In this article, agency is considered in the context of learning and the assessment of learning, from the perspective of the student. The history of the concept of agency dates to the Enlightenment, when the role of education in supporting autonomous action began to be emphasised (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). In learning theories, agency has since been considered, among other things, as an active activity of the student in the process of knowledge construction (constructivist learning theories, e.g., Driscoll, 2014), as social participation and identity construction (socio-cultural learning theories, e.g. Illeris, 2014), as experiential learning and identity development (adult learning theories; e.g. Mezirov, 1981), and as emancipatory community empowerment (critical pedagogy, e.g. Freire, 1970). In this study, we refer to agency as a theoretical concept that describes the reciprocal relationship between the student and the learning environment (e.g., Jääskelä et al., 2017). In this case, agency is seen as individual experiences of how the learning environment creates opportunities or constraints for students to actively learn and participate. As the goals of education and lifelong learning are increasingly linked to economic goals (European Union, 2018), we see the need to consider agency in a socio-cultural context (Emirbayer et al., 1998, see also Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020) and in an ecological (Emirbayer et al., 1998; Biesta & Tedder, 2007) framework of agency that extends beyond the individual and takes into account the interconnection between agency and the learning environment. Agency is thus not only a personal characteristic or ability of the individual, but is also reflected in various structural factors, such as pedagogical solutions in education.

Research in learning pedagogy emphasizes the active role of students in learning (e.g., Boud & Molloy, 2013; Winstone & Carless, 2019). Given the strong influence of assessment on learning (e.g., Ramsden 2003; Biggs & Tang 2007), recent research (e.g., Crisp, 2012; Boud & Soler, 2016) on assessment also emphasizes pedagogical assessment and feedback practices (e.g., self- and peer-assessment) that aim to develop students' lifelong learning skills, active role in learning and self-assessment skills. However, unidirectional, declarative, and summative (end-of-course) assessment practices are still common in higher education (Van der Kleij et. al.,2019; Nieminen, 2021), although student-centred, participative, and formative (during learning) assessment practices have become more common in higher education (e.g., Winstone & Boud, 2020; Winstone, 2022). In this study, we are interested in how university students perceive their agency to be constructed in the context of teacher-centred summative assessment practices. By these assessment practices, we mean the written and audio feedback given by the teacher to the student at the end of the course. In this context, we use assessment feedback to refer to an assessment practice in which the teacher provides reasoned feedback on the assessment he or she has made. This feedback is usually either written feedback or audio feedback in the form of an audio file. Assessment feedback is therefore a more detailed part of the more general assessment concept and the broader assessment process (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Winstone & Boud, 2020). By summative assessment feedback, we mean the one-way assessment feedback given by the teacher to the student to justify the assessment (Boud, 2000; Crisp, 2012). The purpose of summative assessment feedback is to assess how well the student has achieved the objectives

(Boud, 2000; Crisp, 2012). Summative feedback is considered teacher-centred and refers to teaching and assessment based on the transfer of knowledge to the student (Ramsden, 2003; Van der Kleij et al., 2019). Summative feedback has been seen to limit students' activity and influence on their own learning (Biggs, 1998), but also to activate and strengthen students' sense of agency, even when given at the end of the course (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Although assessment and feedback practices that emphasize student agency and participation have become more common, teacher-centred assessment feedback practices are still relatively prevalent in higher education (Winstone & Boud, 2020; Winstone, 2022). Universities have been criticized for imparting theoretical and formal knowledge rather than strengthening student's agency. Research has shown that student agency can be strengthened through supportive and interactive pedagogy (Jääskelä et al., 2017) and that socio-constructivist pedagogy based on collaboration and interaction best supports skills development (Virtanen & Tynjälä, 2019). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the conditions for the development of agency in higher education students (Jääskelä et al., 2017). Assessment and feedback have been studied for decades from different perspectives, but to our knowledge, research on the relationship between agency and summative assessment feedback has been rather limited so far (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020; Nieminen et al., 2021).

This perspective is important because assessment and assessment feedback are related to student agency through learning. Assessment and feedback have been found to drive the learning process so strongly that learning occurs according to how students expect assessment to occur (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Therefore, this study focuses on how summative assessment feedback could support students' agency in future digital learning environments in a way that is as sustainable and as possible from a learning perspective (e.g., Hays & Reinders, 2020). This is an important question in a context where learning and teaching is fragmenting into narrow competences, micro-credentials, and digital learning platforms (Tamoliune et. al., 2023).

This study explores the agency that teacher-centred summative written and audio feedback provides in higher education. We examine assessment feedback from an agentic perspective and aim to generate further understanding of assessment practices that promote students' agency in their own learning. From these premises, we have formulated the research question for this study. The aim of the study is to investigate what kind of agency is generated by students' experiences of summative assessment feedback?

To find answers to the research question, we designed a Webropol survey for Finnish open university online students of education subjects. The Finnish open university, which is the context of the study, provides education and training that is in line with the universities' degree requirements and meets the needs of working life as part of the universities' mission of continuous learning (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017). An open university can offer individual university courses, broader study modules or a pathway towards a degree (Joutsen et al., 2021). In 2022, there were around 111000 open university students (Vipunen 2023). A total of 35 open university students responded to the survey. The data was analysed using systematic content analysis. The theoretical framework used was the literature describing agency and assessment feedback and how feedback can reflect student agency.

**Student agency**

The focus of this research is on the agency of students and how teacher-centered written or audio feedback can reinforce that. Research on agency has for long been dominated by an individual and psychological perspective (Harris et al., 2018; Nieminen et al., 2021; Winstone, 2022). Nowadays, agency is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, which emphasizes the social and ecological dimensions of agency (Emirbayer et al., 1998; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). These dimensions are related to how individuals perceive and interpret the environment as offering opportunities for active participation, influence, and choices (Jääskelä et al., 2017).

Jääskelä and colleagues (2017) define higher education student agency as the student's experience of having access to personal, relational, and participatory resources and of being empowered to act through personal, relational, and participatory resources that enable them to act and learn in learning contexts in a purposeful and meaningful way (Jääskelä et al., 2017). Accordingly, the term 'agency' is used with reference to the learner's personal ability to act, influence and make choices in specific socio-cultural and physical environments that either constrain or enable agency (see Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

Agency has been conceptualized from different perspectives. Interpreted through these frameworks, different feedback practices produce different enabling and constraining factors for students. Emirbayer and colleagues (1998) have presented a socio-cultural framework of agency that includes three temporal dimensions. According to the iterative or historical dimension, agency is constructed based on an individual's previous experiences and understandings. According to Nieminen and Tuohilampi (2020), iterative agency manifests itself, for example, in the student's previous assessment experiences. Emirbayer and colleagues (1998) argue further that in the projective or future-oriented dimension, the individual imagines possible paths and options and constructs agency through them.

## Assessment feedback

In addition to agency, another key concept in this study is assessment feedback. Feedback has been redefined in recent years. For example, researchers have talked about an "old and new paradigm" (Winstone, 2022) and "Feedback Mark 0" versus "Feedback Mark 2" (Boud & Molloy, 2013). The former describe feedback from a conventional and cognitive perspective, where feedback is seen as a transfer of information and its role is to correct learning. The feedback process is one-way (narrative) and does not involve actual interaction. Winstone (2022) refers to such feedback as feedback information that can help students improve the quality of their work and their learning strategies. The latter newer mode, on the other hand, describes feedback from a social constructionist perspective, based on interaction and construction of shared knowledge and understanding (Sadler, 2010; Evans, 2013; Aijawi & Boud, 2017). Winstone (2022) refers to such feedback as a process that emphasizes interactive learning, for example, talking with other students.

The shift in feedback paradigms can also be described as a shift from teacher-centered (TCL) concepts of teaching, assessment and feedback based on knowledge transfer towards student-centered (SCL) concepts highlighting the student's active role (Ramsden, 2003; Van der Kleij et al., 2019). Summative one-way assessment and feedback have been seen as teacher-centered (TCL) practices.

Summative assessment has been the dominant paradigm for decades (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Boud, 2000). Its role has been to certificate evidence of learning (Boud, 2000). Summative assessment has also been criticized: For example, it has been seen as leading students to use lower cognitive processes, leaving the level of learning thin (Biggs, 1998). Students also perceive summative assessment as disconnected from the learning process (Mumm et al., 2016). Seeing assessment as separate from the teaching and learning process may also be a reason why teachers choose summative and repeated assessment methods in their teaching (Hailikari et al., 2014). Summative assessment has also been found to lead students to repeat information and seek grades rather than deeper insight or learning (Struyven et al., 2005).

Research-based evidence of the significance of versatile assessment feedback practices for student learning and agency has been limited (Ramsden, 2003). However, a link has been found between student-centered assessment practices and student activity and participation. The design of assessment and feedback should focus on how it affects learning (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Winstone & Boud, 2020). If students are enabled and given concrete opportunities to participate and take responsibility for their own learning, they will develop a positive sense of competence and agency. It is also about how the ownership of own learning and agency gained in university learning are transferred to other contexts, such as the world of work (Jääskelä et al., 2020).

As Nieminen and Tuohilampi (2020) suggest, students' agency can be strengthened during their university studies through various means when they feel that feedback supports their learning in the long term. The socio-cultural agency of university students is strengthened when individuals make decisions about what is appropriate in a given situation and context and act accordingly (Emirbayer et al., 1998). According to Nieminen and Tuohilampi (2020), this agency dimension occurs, for example, when students describe their practical experiences in relation to feedback. Agency is constructed not only from an individual perspective but also from environmental conditions (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Agency is seen as something to be achieved rather than something to be controlled. Agency can be strengthened by actively engaging the individual with his or her environment. According to Chong (2021), the ecological perspective highlights how different elements of feedback interact with each other. For example, Han and Hyland (2019), point out that students may have difficulties to understand written feedback if their previous assessment experiences are associated with different feedback strategies.

Nieminen and Tuohilampi (2020) have outlined university students´ agency from three dimensions: Adaptive agency which occurs when students examine their own learning and gradually take more responsibility for it. Maladaptive agency is reflected, for example, in students' experiences of teacher performance. Students may also experience a lack of agency when they feel they cannot cope with assessment tasks. (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020.) In the socio-material framework, agency is seen as a multidimensional relationship or interplay between people, things, technology, and texts, and what they produce (Zukas & Malcolm, 2019; Gravett, 2020; Nieminen et al., 2021). According to Zukas and Malcolm (2019), socio-material can include physical things such as books or computers, learning spaces or environments, or more abstract concepts such as power. Charteris and Smardon (2018) point out that in future technological learning environments, student agency must be increasingly considered in relation to technology. Nieminen and colleagues (2021) argue that, for example, if the learning environment allows the student only to listen to audio feedback, without a possibility to record or transform it into a verbal form, for instance, the system limits the student's agency. Socio-material agency is also hindered in situations where, for example, students have poor Internet access or feel social pressure to provide peer feedback. In such cases, assessment feedback cannot be considered constructive, equal, or inclusive in terms of students' holistic agency. (Nieminen et al., 2021.)

Designing meaningful assessment feedback practices from an agency perspective should consider not only individuals but also how individuals interact with physical materials such as assessment matrices, notes, oral presentations, and technological devices (Nieminen et al., 2021). From a communicative point of view, agency can be regarded as a discursive construction. Feedback can be understood as a discursive practice; feedback not only reflects reality but also constructs it. A discursive perspective on feedback also enables policy analysis to unravel what is taken for granted and as if unquestioned practices (Nieminen et al., 2021).

**Data and method**

This study examines students' experiences of agency in summative teacher-centered assessment feedback practices in higher education. The data consists of textual data collected by means of a Webropol survey from 35 adult Open University students in spring 2021. The data was analysed using data driven content analysis.

The data was collected through a Webropol questionnaire. The students answered the questionnaire anonymously and without any identifying information. The questionnaire consisted of four quantitative background questions (age, gender, education, number of credits completed) and two additional open-ended background questions on the aim of studying and the student's life situation. Of the respondents, 97% were female and they had completed an average of 48 credits. The respondents' previous educational backgrounds varied (see table 1). In addition to the background questions, the questionnaire contained 13 open-ended

questions on assessment and feedback. The sections of the questionnaire that asked about positive and negative experiences with written and audio feedback were selected as data for this study. In total, 26 pages (A4) of analyzable data were collected. The student responses were extensive and varied in content.

**Table 1**

*The respondent's previous educational background*

|  | n | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Primary School | 0 | 0,0% |
| High school graduate | 1 | 2,9% |
| Vocational education | 16 | 45,7% |
| Polytechnic education | 12 | 34,3% |
| University education | 6 | 17,1% |

The scientific theoretical framework of the study was based on a hermeneutic approach to analysis. Hermeneutics holds that reality is ambiguous and the meanings that construct it are individual and contextual (Patton, 2015). The aim of describing the responses and individual meanings were described and interpreted to explore the studied phenomenon of agency and assessment feedback and the relationship between them. The study was interested in the meanings that students associated with teacher-centered summative assessment feedback and agency from their own perspective. The principles of meaning inquiry with hermeneutic interpretive analysis were combined (Patton, 2015). In practice, this meant that students' feedback experiences from an agency perspective were read and interpreted. The questionnaire asked about the different experiences related to the assessment feedback. The data was rich and allowed us to explore the link between assessment feedback practices and agency experiences.

The analysis was based on systematic data driven content analysis (Patton, 2015; Grippendorf, 2018). Ethical issues were carefully considered in the handling of the data by focusing only on the part of the data relevant to the research question and by carefully pseudonymising (removing identifying information) (Roth & von Unger, 2018). As the data in this study was part of a larger study considering students' experiences and data set, the first step of the analysis was to extract the written and audio feedback sections. The material was carefully read through. The first content analysis classification was based on the types of agencies: adaptive, maladaptive and lack of agency (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020). At this stage, Nieminen and Tuohilampi's (2020) concept of maladaptive agency was supplemented and refined, according to whether the maladaptation was due to external factors or to the student him- or herself. Next, the data was classified as reflecting adaptive agency, maladaptive agency, and lack of agency. Then, the agency in the written assessment feedback data was classified as adaptive (29 mentions), maladaptive (8 mentions) and lack of agency (1). Agency of the audio assessment feedback data was divided into adaptive (5 mentions), maladaptive (11 mentions) and lack of agency (1 mention).

Next, the data, classified into three main categories, was analysed using content analysis. Mentions of the categories of adaptive, maladaptive and lack of agency were first classified into unifying subcategories. The subcategories were combined into more abstract content-describing main categories until this was no longer possible from a content-wise perspective. The content analysis resulted in the following main categories for each initial classification: adaptive, maladaptive and lack of agency.

The logic of the analysis of the data and the construction of the results are based on the following abductive process. For the written assessment feedback, two main categories were identified for adaptive agency: development as a learner and personality. Maladaptive agency was divided into the following main categories limiting student agency: content of feedback, non-interactivity, and discursiveness. In addition,

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there was one mention that was associated with lack of agency. Two main categories of adaptive agency related to audio feedback were identified as supporting student agency: content and interactivity. Three main categories of maladaptive agency were identified as limiting agency: material factors, conflict between the tone of the message and the language, and the teacher's action. In addition, one mention was identified as lack of agency. We distinguish the categories in more detail in the results chapter and discuss the results in relation to the contexts and the usefulness of the results in the discussion.

## Results

The results showed the diverse meanings of assessment feedback practices for the construction of university students' agency. In the next section, first the results of the written summative assessment feedback and then the results of the audio summative assessment feedback are presented.

### Students' agency in the context of summative written assessment feedback

Based on the analysis, it is interpreted that most students expressed adaptive agency in the written summative feedback. Two main categories of adaptive agency were created: the categories of development as a student and personality. In both categories, feedback was seen as reinforcing student agency in learning. Maladaptive agency was divided into the following main categories limiting student agency: content of feedback, non-interactivity, and discursiveness. Within these categories, interpreted feedback is seen as limiting student agency in their own learning. Interestingly, the maladaptive agency was not directed at the student him/herself, but at the teacher and the wider university assessment culture.

*Adaptive agency -developing as a student and personality*

In the category of developing as a student, assessment feedback was conceptualized in terms of facilitating learning. Students perceived that the assessment feedback enabled them to develop in their learning and as students. Assessment feedback was seen as having a long-term dimension than immediate learning and was seen as helping students perform better in subsequent tasks. However, students limited the importance of assessment feedback to the learning context (projective dimension). The importance of assessment feedback and its temporal dimension were seen as extending only to subsequent tasks and ongoing studies, and not, for example, to the working life context of non-formal learning.

> Feedback helps me become a better learner and I have changed my behavior after receiving feedback. So very useful.
> I think the written feedback has been good and clear. I like the fact that I can save the feedback for myself and reflect on it often if necessary.

Personality was another main category of adaptive agency. The adaptive agency was interpreted to occur when assessment feedback was meaningful and given in an empowering and encouraging tone. Written assessment feedback was perceived as an appreciation of the student's work. In online learning, there is often little interaction and encounters between the teacher and student. From the point of view of empowering the student, the personal nature of feedback was perceived as important.

> The feedback, which was super encouraging and appreciative of my study skills, I went to see it several times and read aloud to my husband. It gave me so much faith in myself.
> It's really nice to get written feedback and it is received more than face to face, because the courses are mostly online.
> The written feedback has been personal, just for me. I like them.

*Maladaptive agency – content of the feedback, non- interactivity, and discursiveness*

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In the written assessment feedback, the factors limiting agency were related to teacher performance. Assessment feedback was conceptualized as corrective feedback, which referred to the teacher's judgment between right and wrong in the student's response (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In other words, the teacher tells the student what is wrong and what is right in the answer. There are indications that assessment practices are reflected in students' conceptions of knowledge, in the maintenance of different conceptions of knowledge (see Nieminen et al., 2021). Deep learning requires the formation of one's own meanings and understandings from different perspectives. Mechanical reception of information is sufficient for superficial learning only. One-way corrective feedback on a task can maintain the learner's dualistic concept of knowledge.

> The one time I have received feedback, I was disappointed with the teacher's feedback because just being good and copying my words was not enough for me. Once I didn't get any feedback at all, so I still don't know if the assignments were done correctly or if there were mistakes. I hope I didn't learn something wrong from them.

Also, the maladaptive agency was interpreted when students perceived the assessment feedback they received from the teacher as insufficient or scarce. Some students perceived that they had invested in their studies and their own learning but were disappointed with the effort the teacher had put into their assessment feedback. This suggests a traditional teacher-centered culture of assessment and feedback, where assessment and feedback are the responsibility and the work of the teacher. There was a discrepancy between students' expectations of feedback and the reality.

> The challenge is probably due to the writer: Extensive written answers will certainly take up a huge amount of time for the teacher assessing the paper. If, on the other hand, the assessment is very short and succinct, it may not be able to accommodate much, e.g., suggestions for improvement, etc. Sometimes it seems that the feedback does not correspond to the amount of time you have spent on the task.

In addition to the content of the assessment feedback (corrective contribution and quantity), the lack of adaptation was related to the non-interactive and one-sided nature of the written assessment feedback. Some students wanted a one-to-one discussion with a teacher about their assignment. Students found summative assessment feedback as declarative and monologic in nature and retrospective. (see also Dawson et al., 2019). They recognized the possibility of self-initiated contact, but agency was not concretized in action. Students' socialization to the traditional one-way assessment culture is deep seated. A conversation with the teacher would be an opportunity to strengthen the learning and feed forwarding dimension of assessment feedback and thus promote student agency. "After the feedback, sometimes you would have wanted to justify what you had done and pose questions to the person who gave you the feedback."

> The discursiveness of written feedback as a challenge to agency was interpreted. The question of power in assessment and feedback arises when asking how discursive feedback practices produce agency from a particular and limited perspective (Nieminen et al., 2021). In written feedback, the teacher can either explicitly or implicitly produce, maintain or change the student's own views. There is a lot of power associated with assessment and feedback. "The challenge is how to verbalize the feedback in a way that the reader perceives it as encouragement, not a rebuke."

*Lack of agency*

In the written feedback material, evidence of lack of agency in one mention only was found. Corrective feedback can be interpreted as merely pointing out errors unless it is accompanied with positive and encouraging comments on the student's work. "Feedback has also been perceived as 'oh, how many mistakes have I made, will I ever write correctly,' etc."

**Students' agency in the context of summative audio assessment feedback**

Now we look in more detail at university students' experiences of their agency in the context of summative audio assessment feedback. Only a small proportion of the students in the study had experiences of summative teacher-centered audio assessment feedback. This was associated with several factors that we interpreted as supporting student agency in their own learning. In relation to audio feedback, two main categories of adaptive agency were identified and interpreted as supporting students' agency in their own learning: content and interactivity. In contrast, three main categories of maladaptive agency were interpreted as limiting student agency: material factors, conflict between the tone of the message and the language, and the teacher's action.

*Adaptive agency - content and interactivity*

In the data, audio feedback played a minor role in supporting content-wise learning. The learning support aspect of audio feedback was related to the content of feedback itself, more specifically the extent of the feedback. Students felt that more extensive written feedback was more relevant to their learning than less extensive audio feedback.

*Recorded feedback can be given more widely*

Audio feedback was seen as a channel of interaction between teacher and student. As with written feedback, the personal nature of audio feedback was seen as particularly important, as there was rarely an opportunity for face-to-face interaction during the learning process.

Audio feedback feels personal, as in distance learning you may never have met or spoken to the teacher when you receive your first audio feedback.

The audio feedback had more to say than the written feedback and I liked the audio feedback a lot.

*Maladaptive agency -material factors, conflict, and teacher's action*

For audio feedback, students felt that material factors were more limiting than in written feedback. The most limiting factor was the technical problem of not being able to record the audio assessment feedback for later use. In addition, audio feedback was often associated with technical problems such as audio stuttering. Another challenge was related to the flexibility of listening independent of time and place.

The challenge I found with audio feedback was that it was more difficult to record than written feedback, and it took a while to find it. (student x)

You must listen several times. Read text better so you can save it to your own file and use it for learning.

Audio assessment feedback was associated with a similar conflict between the content and tone of the teacher's speech as in the case of written feedback. From the perspective of supporting student agency, the teacher needs to be sensitive to the style and tone of audio feedback. A mismatch between the discursive and the non-discursive can leave the student in a state of confusion, which can convey a mixed message to the student. "Disadvantages - >the weight and tone of the audio can communicate something other than what the supervisor is saying."

*Lack of agency*

In the case of teacher-centered summative audio assessment feedback, there was only one identified mention that could indicate lack of agency.

*I have not received any feedback and I do not need any.*

The results show that teacher-centered summative assessment feedback is in many ways relevant to the construction of agency experienced by university students. The next section answers the research

question and discusses the relevance of the findings in relation to the larger context and the theoretical framework presented earlier.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The study was inspired by the OECD's education policy objective to strengthen higher education students' agency (OECD, 2019). Agency has been highlighted as a key factor in the new generation of assessment environments (Charteris & Smardon, 2018). Therefore, it is justified to explore agency in learning by examining the relationship between agency and assessment feedback. This study asked what kind of agency emerges from students' assessment experiences.

Both adaptive and maladaptive agencies were identified in student responses regarding written and audio feedback. Written feedback was perceived to promote learning and enable development as a student. The interpretation is that summative written assessment feedback can at best strengthen students' reflective agency and provide students with tools for reflection that help them become aware of their own learning and envision new perspectives. In this way, teaching not only reinforces students' existing views, but also generates new learning and new insights.

Although summative assessment has been criticized (Biggs, 1998; Sadler, 2010), summative written feedback on student output and the learning process can, at its best, strengthen student agency by stimulating student learning (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), quality feedback not only points to the gap between performance and goal, but also encourages the narrowing of that gap. From a socio-material perspective, written feedback was perceived to support the agency because it was easy to return to later.

In the case of written feedback, maladaptive agency is interpreted as students criticizing the teacher and his/her assessment skills. Instead of the concept of maladaptive agency, the concept of contradictory agency is used here because the results do not necessarily indicate a lack of agency. Instead, these experiences may point to a student-customer phenomenon stemming from managerialism, where students position themselves as customers who buy services (Bunce et al., 2016; Siivonen & Filander, 2020).

From the perspective of agency, it would be important to favor assessment and feedback that guides students to become aware of and actively take responsibility for their own learning process rather than evaluating the teacher's abilities and assessment skills (Boud & Molloy, 2013). On the other hand, it is also important to be critical of teachers' assessment skills, which make up a highly complex competence area as such (Xu and Brown, 2016). It is noteworthy that not all academic teachers in Finland have comprehensive pedagogical skills, which means that teachers' pedagogical and assessment skills may be narrowly defined (Juvonen & Toom, 2022). For the university's student agency to grow to its full potential and be sustainably renewed, several factors need to be taken into account in a transparent way, including the assessment feedback practices.

In addition to teachers' assessment skills, we interpreted contradictory agency where students perceived the lack of interactivity in the written feedback process as problematic. While students longed for discussion, they remained passive recipients of feedback. It should also be noted that teacher-student interaction has been found to be one of the factors constructing teacher identity (Laiho et al., 2022).

In the context of audio feedback, adaptive and reflective agency was manifested in mentions of satisfaction with the breadth of the content of feedback. On the other hand, researchers have warned against overloading feedback with too much information and detail (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Students liked the personal and interactive nature of audio feedback, which is in line with previous findings (Knauf, 2016). In the future, it is important to pay more attention to interaction, as student agency has been found to be best built through supportive and interactive pedagogy (Jääskelä et al., 2020; Virtanen & Tynjälä, 2019).

The above factors may indicate a reflective approach to studying and learning and that students see a role for themselves in providing feedback. Students also suggest that while implementing the ideal of

lifelong learning, they need personal and individual attention and encounters to promptly update their skills and knowledge.

Evidence of maladaptive and contradictory agency was found when examining students' perceptions of feedback from a socio-material and discursive perspective. Technical problems and the discrepancy between the teacher's message and tone of voice can leave students in a state of confusion that is not conducive to agency. This finding draws attention to the role of physical factors in the construction of agency in future digital and learning environments. Digitalization may alleviate some elements of inequality, but on the other hand it also creates new ones. Audio feedback and digitalization play an important role in building inclusive higher education. In the digital learning environments of the future, more attention should be paid to the socio-material dimension of agency in assessment feedback. To fulfil the principle of accessibility, it is important to consider how individuals interact with material artifacts such as assessment matrices. Material artifacts not only construct agency through their interaction with the student but can also become agents in their own right (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020).

Written and audio feedback seemed to produce both reflective and contradictory student responses. In the analysis, the student responses indicated but little lack of agency or incomplete agency, such as fear of inability to cope with the studies or assessments. Overall, the results suggest that students have different and personal preferences for different feedback practices. This may be reflected in the student's perception of feedback and the agency that it provides to the student. Furthermore, the results suggest that written feedback has a greater future-oriented meaning for agency than audio feedback. Different frameworks of agency, such as socio-material agency, help understand how agency is enabled in specific feedback practices.

The conclusion of the study is that the pedagogical process, involving the different methods and objectives of assessment, must be understood in depth by both the teacher and the students. An active dialogue between the participants about the learning process strengthens the awareness of the learning and assessment processes and reinforces the agency of all participants. Diverse and pedagogically based assessment practices can enable and strengthen the development of university students' agency. Similarly, in addition to a wide range of assessment practices, several other factors, such as student-centered pedagogical solutions, support the development of agency. The relationship between assessment and agency is significant: sustainable and lifelong learning processes in constantly changing environments, including digital ones, require the ability of individuals to assess their own performance as responsible members of society. Given the multiple dimensions and functions of assessment, it is important to maintain the diversity of assessment practices and to make evidence-based choices about assessment in higher education.

Various limitations of the present study should be considered. First, only 35 students participated in the study. On the other hand, qualitative research aims to describe and understand the studied phenomenon in depth, which is why the size or number of data is not a direct measure of reliability (Patton, 2002). Nevertheless, a larger data set could have shed even more light on the studied phenomenon. There were hardly any cases in the category "lack of agency" in the data. This may be explained by the fact that the students who responded to the survey were basically students who had been successful in their studies. Qualitative research does not seek generalizations, and the transferability of results can also be critically assessed (Patton, 2002). The data was collected from students in education disciplines, who may therefore have more linguistic concepts and more agentic scaffolding to describe their own learning and agency. In the future, it would be important to investigate the intertwining of assessment, feedback, and agency in students from different disciplines (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020).

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