1. Introduction
This project is a two-year large-scale exploratory study into student perceptions of formative feedback in two schools from the faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences at the University of Manchester to gain a better understanding of student preferences as to the function, content, and mode of delivery of formative feedback. In this first phase of the study, several hundred undergraduate and postgraduate students from three taught courses in the schools of Mechanical, Aerospace and Civil Engineering, and Electronic and Electrical Engineering, were surveyed. This was followed up by focus group meetings with voluntary students from the three courses. Results and conclusions from the first phase indicate that the majority of the students surveyed see the purpose of feedback as to help correct misunderstandings, rather than to help pass the exam, or solve problems set by the lecturer. Their overall preference is as far as detailed as possible in the feedback given, rather than just brief explanations.

2. Background
Despite increasing in recent years, there is evidence that there remains general dissatisfaction among students in the UK HE sector, with regard to the feedback they receive (HEFCE 2014). Reasons for this dissatisfaction are diverse and not always clear; despite there being much anecdotal evidence that teaching staff already believe they are meeting students’ needs by providing plenty of feedback.

This particular study focuses on formative, rather than summative, feedback, which can be either credit or non-credit bearing. In the view of the authors, the primary purpose of formative feedback is to help students assess what level they are at throughout a course unit and in which areas remedial action may be required to improve their performance.

There is a widely-held view that for formative feedback to be effective it should support and help students become self-regulated learners (Macol and Macfarlane Dick 2006). That this goal is not always achieved is often blamed on students not using and/or applying formative feedback in the ways expected by teaching staff. It is often argued that students may be unclear about how to interpret and use the feedback given, due to lack of clear guidance given by tutors and/or students’ lack of experience in interpreting feedback (Robinson Pope 2013). However some studies have tried to probe these reasons, and shown that while they are often able to express their expectations in regard to formative feedback, (Perera et al 2008), there is sometimes a lack of alignment between tutor-student expectations (Ormond and Merry 2011).

3. Method
The three course units selected for this initial study were drawn from two Schools in the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences at The University of Manchester. The units were selected to cover both undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes, with a cohort size ranging from 35 to 185. Table 2 provides a short description of the three chosen course units.

4. Data Findings
Respondents demographics across the three course units are provided in Table 2. There are similarities across respondents from the three units in terms of male dominated gender balance, but the age profile of respondents from the two undergraduate units (EEEN2004 and EEEN3005) is slightly lower than the postgraduate taught unit, whose proportion of non-native English speakers is also considerably higher. These respondent figures are representative of the wider cohort expectations (Ormond and Merry 2011).

Respondents viewed formative feedback as being concerned with helping students’ performance via periodic assessments. Formative feedback is as likely to be verbal as it is written, and can be conveyed in response to a student’s question mid way through a lecture, or via a quiz completed on a Virtual learning Environment or as written coursework feedback. Interestingly, several students were not all clear what formative feedback is and how it relates to its counter part summative feedback. A number of students also conflated formative feedback given by lecturers to students to the evaluation questionnaires which students are given to assess the quality of lecturers. These misconceptions are central to the challenge of providing effective formative feedback to students, and ensuring that students recognise all forms of formative feedback that they receive on a particular course unit.

The ranking of responses to question 5 across the three cohorts is shown in Figure 2, illustrating a common perception across all three course units for the feedback to be centred on resolving any misunderstandings rather than on enabling students to simply pass the final examination.

References
HEFCE (2014) National Student Survey results trends and analysis