

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Making the Language of Assessment Inclusive – Introduction to the Project and Literature

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract: This presentation outlines the rationale and methodology for a QAA-funded collaborative enhancement project being undertaken by the Universities of the West of England, Brighton, Greenwich, and Hertfordshire. The impetus for this project is that whilst the Advance HE Degree Standards Project seeks to address concerns in the HE sector around a lack of consistency in the embedding and interpretation by academics of the descriptors set out in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications and a perceived trend towards grade inflation, students are equally uncertain when it comes to the interpretation of the language of assessment for a variety of reasons (Richards & Pilcher, 2010). The project is a critical enquiry into what we term the “mysterious quotients” of commonly used assessment terms and phrases and will ultimately inform the development of a toolkit for staff and students to support dialogue, transparency and shared responsibility in the assessment process.

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The maintenance of national standards across the higher education sector relies upon alignment by each HEI of their local standards with the descriptors set out in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications. However, research evidence (e.g. Bloxham & Price, 2015; Hudson, Bloxham, den Outer & Price, 2015) does not support the existence of a sector-wide shared understanding of standards amongst academics. Given that standards, and judgements about standards are socially constructed, draw on tacit knowledge and rely on the interpretation of particular terminology, efforts to pin down standards via detailed learning outcomes and assessment criteria may not be sufficient to ensure academics’ shared understanding of assessment terms such as “critically evaluate”, “analyse”, “discuss”. Concerns around a lack of consistency and a perceived trend towards grade inflation has resulted in the Advance HE Degree Standards Project which provides professional development for external examiners in their role of safeguarding national standards, and promotes opportunities for the calibration of standards through social moderation activities between academics.

These issues are also at play for students, for whom the language of assessment often remains unintelligible. Their resulting concerns around unfairness, inconsistency and a lack of transparency around assessment and marking are reflected in generally lower NSS scores for assessment and feedback than in other areas.

The project is set within the context of recent work on developing student assessment literacy (e.g. Carless and Boud, 2018) , including the development and use of assessment criteria to promote student self-regulation (e.g. Balloo et al, 2018), and builds on previous research in this field. Much of this work emphasises the importance of *dialogue* in moving away from:

"the notion that academic standards can be documented and codified in such a way that they may be available for the passive consumption of all stakeholders in higher education." (Rust, Price & O'Donovan 2003: 151)

Richards & Pilcher (2010), investigating UK and Chinese students' understanding of generic assessment terms, identified five categories of factors contributing to student confusion with assessment terms such as 'critically reflect', 'discuss' and 'analyse'. Culture and language, subject specificity and the level of study all contributed to the shaping of understandings of both students and staff. They suggest an 'anti-glossary' approach, built around dialogue can empower students *by incorporating diverse understandings of the assessment terms and their broader implications.*

Similarly, Butcher et al (2017) note that for some students, the use of a common term like "meet" in a different context can cause difficulties.

Project Methodology

The project has been designed as a staff-student partnership, involving student research partners at all the following stages:

1. Linguistic analysis of key student-facing documentation (module documents, assessment briefs and criteria, grading descriptors), alongside national and institutional reference points (e.g. subject benchmarks, FHEQ, institutional grading descriptors)
2. A survey of students studying modules across 17 subject areas, informed by the document analysis, investigating the understanding of commonly used terms in assessment (e.g. 'critically reflect'), feedback (eg: "good") and policy around assessment (eg: "fit to sit")
3. Focus groups with students and staff in each institution facilitated by student researchers from across each institution to explore in more depth how commonly used terms are deployed by academic staff and interpreted by students.
4. Development of a toolkit for use by staff and students to improve shared understanding and dialogue around the language of assessment.

A recent article by Matthews et al (2021) suggests that the involvement of students as partners in the sphere of assessment and feedback is rare, yet presents an opportunity for real pedagogic progress, based on their shared features of the need for dialogue and trust. We anticipate that this project will contribute to this progress, as it will yield not only a toolkit designed to improve staff-

student dialogue around assessment, but also an evaluation of working with students as partners in this area (as we discuss in another paper within this symposium).

References: References:

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