

243 Clear in advance to whom? Transparency of assessment criteria in UK Higher Education assessment policy and guidance.

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

UK universities commonly use criterion referenced assessment and inform students of assessment criteria. In their assessment policy documents, universities outline assessment criteria requirements and suggest ways in which they should be used. Using document analysis and corpus linguistic methods on 120 Higher Education institutions' assessment policy documents, this project gives insight into the characteristics of transparency in assessment criteria communication, with whom assessment criteria should be communicated, and the approaches taken in Russell-Group and non-Russell Group universities. Preliminary quantitative findings show that the most frequent criteria communication collocations relate to making assessment criteria and marking schemes 'available' to students and external examiners, but rarely to internal assessors. Transparency is characterised by availability with little promotion of activities or discussion to foster shared understanding of assessment criteria. By providing an overview of approaches to transparency of assessment criteria, this study enhances understanding and practice of assessment policy designers.

Full paper

Background

UK universities commonly use criterion referenced assessment and inform students of assessment criteria (Jönsson & Prins, 2018). University directives for the communication of assessment criteria are increasingly important to assessment stakeholders and policy makers. The National Student Survey (NSS) results show enduring dissatisfaction with assessment (Buckley, 2021). Moreover, the 2023 NSS will ask students not just whether marking criteria were given in advance, but 'how clear' they were in advance. While "it is generally and widely accepted that explicit criteria should be shared with students" (Jönsson & Prins, 2018, p. 1), it is unclear whether policy encourages this in practice.

The practice of sharing assessment criteria has been driven by a need for accountability, enhanced transparency of the assessment process, and to communicate assessment expectations (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2021). In their assessment policy documents, universities variously suggest assessment criteria should be used (1) as a foundation and compass to guide the learning process (Andrade & Du, 2005), (2) as tools and instruments (such as rubrics and marking schemes) to guide fairness and transparency of assessment and marking (Jönsson, 2014), and (3) as an administrative and procedural point of reference for standards used exclusively by academics (Sadler, 2014). This study argues that criterion referenced assessment is a social constructive practice, wherein assessment criteria should be communicated and discussed with the assessment team, and criteria and their interpretation communicated to students (O'Donovan et al., 2004).

To improve transparency of assessment, institutions need clarity on best practice for effective policy to be developed.

Aims and Research Questions

This study aimed to investigate whether and how the directives in UK universities' assessment policies promote communication and transparency of assessment criteria for students and other assessment stakeholders. This study addressed three research questions:

1. To whom is communication of assessment criteria directed in assessment policy documentation?

2. What characterises transparency of assessment criteria in assessment policy documentation?
3. Is there a difference between how the communication of assessment criteria is represented in assessment policy documentation in Russell-Group and non-Russell Group universities.

To answer the first question, the specific stakeholders to whom assessment criteria should be communicated is examined. This is particularly interesting in the HE context where assessment policies are framed to address different stakeholders (e.g., teachers, internal examiners, external examiners, and students) based on their roles in the assessment process (Raaper, 2017). This study contends that assessment criteria cannot be clear to students if assessment policy fails to explicitly position them as primary beneficiaries of assessment criteria communication.

This study takes as its springboard the assumption that artefacts such as assessment rubrics and marking schemes are straightforward means of communicating assessment criteria and expectations (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2021). Yet, communicating quality is complex. Many aspects of standards and expectations of performance are implicit, tacit and reside in practice (O'Donovan et al., 2004). The second question explores whether transparency of is characterised in assessment policy documentation by making criteria explicit through artefacts or through dialogue about assessment criteria with students and other stakeholders.

Drawing on Winstone's (2022) distinction between different university groups, the third question examines whether there is any difference in how 24 self-proclaimed "world-class, research intensive" UK universities (Russell Group, 2022) communicate assessment criteria to stakeholders compared to more teaching-focused, non-Russell Group universities.

Methodology

The data corpus for this study consists of publicly available assessment policy documents from a sample of 120 UK universities. This sample comprises assessment policies from 24 Russell-Group universities and 96 non-Russell Group Universities.

The data corpus was analysed in two ways through an interpretivist approach using deductive thematic coding using Nvivo 12 Pro and using a corpus linguistic software, Sketch Engine, to quantitatively analyse the corpora. In line with Davies (2023), the quantitative analysis focused on grammatical and collocational patterns associated with the term 'assessment criteria'. In combination, the qualitative and quantitative methods increase the validity, reliability, and replicability of this study.

Findings

Preliminary quantitative findings show that the most frequent criteria communication collocations relate to making assessment criteria and marking schemes 'available' to students and external examiners, but rarely to internal assessors. Transparency is characterised by availability with little promotion of activities or discussion to foster shared understanding of assessment criteria. Further analysis has yet to be conducted regarding Russell-Group versus non-Russell Group approaches to making assessment criteria transparent.

Outcome

The outcome of this research will be an overview of guidance for transparency and communication assessment criteria, leading to a set of practical guidelines assessment policy designers.

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