

Challenges International Students Face Understanding Assessment

A guide for
Academics

MARKING SCHEMES

Marking schemes are similar to assessment rubrics but they are more specific and detailed. They provide clear guidance on how to award marks or grades for each criterion and each level of performance..

International students may not understand marking schemes because:

- They may not be aware of or have access to the marking schemes, as they may not be shared by the lecturer or the institution with students at any stage of the assessment process.
- They may not comprehend how the marking schemes are derived or justified, as they may involve subjective judgements or decisions by individual markers or moderators.
- They may not be able to use the marking schemes for feedback purposes, as they may not receive sufficient explanations or comments on their marks or grades from their lecturer.

ASSESSMENT RUBRICS

Assessment rubrics are tools that help to evaluate and mark student work according to the assessment criteria. They usually consist of a table or a grid that shows the different levels of performance for each criterion and their corresponding marks or grades.

International students may not understand assessment rubrics because:

- They may not be familiar with or have access to the assessment rubrics, as they may not be provided by the lecturer or the institution before or after the assessment task.
- They may not comprehend how the assessment rubrics are used or applied in practice, as they may use different marking scales or systems than those used in their previous educational contexts.
- They may not be able to use the assessment rubrics for self-assessment or peer-assessment purposes, as they may lack the skills or knowledge to judge their own work or others' work objectively and accurately.

ASSESSMENT EXPECTATIONS

Assessment expectations are the general goals and outcomes that the assessment task is designed to measure and achieve. They are usually based on the learning outcomes of the module or course, and they reflect the academic standards and values of the discipline and the institution

International students may not understand assessment expectations because:

- They may come from different educational systems or cultures that have different expectations or approaches to assessment, such as memorisation, reproduction, conformity, etc.
- They may lack familiarity or confidence with the type or genre of assessment, such as essays, reports, presentations, etc., and their purpose, format and conventions.
- They may have difficulty in interpreting or following the assessment instructions or guidelines, due to language barriers, cultural differences or ambiguity.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Assessment criteria are the specific standards or indicators that are used to judge the quality or competence of the student work. They describe what the student needs to do to demonstrate their achievement of the assessment expectations.

International students may not understand assessment criteria because:

- They may not be aware of or have access to the assessment criteria, as they may not be explicitly stated or communicated by the lecturer or the institution.
- They may not comprehend the meaning or significance of the assessment criteria, as they may use unfamiliar or vague terms or phrases, such as analyse, evaluate, compare, contrast, etc.
- They may not be able to apply the assessment criteria to their own work, as they may lack the skills or knowledge to perform the required tasks or actions, such as research, analysis, synthesis, argumentation, etc.

ASSESSMENT BRIEFS

Assessment briefs are the instructions or directions that tell the student what they need to do for a specific assessment task. They usually include the purpose, format, word limit, deadline, submission method and marking criteria of the task.

International students may not understand assessment briefs because:

- They may overlook or ignore some of the important information or details in the assessment briefs, such as the weighting, referencing system or plagiarism policy of the task.
- They may misinterpret or misunderstand some of the requirements or expectations in the assessment briefs, such as the scope, focus or level of difficulty of the task.
- They may have questions or doubts about some of the aspects or elements of the assessment briefs, but they may not feel comfortable or confident to ask for clarification or support from their lecturer or peers.

Designing Assessment with International Students in Mind

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As academics, we have a responsibility to design and deliver assessment that is fair, valid, reliable and transparent for all students, including international students. Here is some advice and good practice that may help you to produce assessment criteria, assessment briefs, assessment rubrics and marking schemes with international undergraduate students in mind:



Align your assessment with the learning outcomes and teaching activities of your module or course, and make sure they are appropriate for the level and discipline of study.



Communicate the alignment between the assessment criteria and learning outcomes to students to ensure they understand how their learning on the module or course will be assessed.



Provide clear and detailed guidance on the purpose, format, word limit, deadline, submission method, marking criteria and rubric of each assessment task. Where possible, provide a physical, and/or digital assessment brief which students can access easily and as many times as they need to throughout the assessment period. If you can, combine the assessment brief, marking criteria and any supporting information into one document.



Consider the diversity of your student cohort and their educational backgrounds. Avoid making assumptions or generalisations about their prior knowledge, skills, experiences or preferences. Respect their different perspectives and contributions. Encourage intercultural dialogue and exchange among students and staff.



Use clear and consistent language to describe what you expect from students and how you will mark their work. Avoid using jargon, slang, idioms or cultural references that may confuse or exclude international students. Explain any terms or phrases that may be unfamiliar or ambiguous to them and provide resources such as a glossary of assessment terms or supporting guidance on how to use the assessment rubric or marking scheme.



Provide opportunities for students to discuss the assessment criteria, ask questions or seek clarification if needed.



Use marking rubrics to evaluate student work according to the assessment criteria. Marking rubrics can help to ensure consistency and fairness in marking, as well as provide feedback to students on their strengths and weaknesses. Use a common marking scale, such as the stepped marking scale recommended by King's College London to avoid confusion or misunderstanding of marks or grades.



Involve students in the assessment process by engaging them in the development of specific marking criteria, self-assessment or peer assessment. This can help to enhance their understanding of the assessment expectations and standards, as well as develop their critical thinking and reflective skills.



Refer to the assessment criteria at the beginning of and during the assessment period. Students especially appreciate reminders when they are about to start preparing their assessment whether that is at the start of revision period for exam-based assessment or even 'at the last minute' for coursework.



Provide timely and constructive feedback on student work using the marking rubric and scheme as a basis. Feedback should be specific, relevant, actionable and supportive. It should highlight what students did well and what they need to improve on, and provide suggestions or resources for further learning.

Here are some examples of where an international undergraduate student may be hindered in understanding assessment expectations, criteria, briefs, rubrics and schemes because of the differences between their previous educational experience and the UK higher education approach to assessment:

A student who is used to memorising and reproducing facts and information from textbooks or lectures may not understand the expectation to demonstrate critical thinking, originality and creativity in their assessments. They may also struggle to use their own words and avoid plagiarism.

A student who is used to writing short and concise answers or multiple-choice questions may not understand the expectation to write long and detailed essays or reports that require a clear structure, argument and evidence. They may also struggle to meet or stick to word limit or format requirements.

A student who is used to following strict rules or guidelines for writing or referencing may not understand the expectation to adapt their style or approach according to the purpose, audience and discipline of their assessments. They may also struggle to use different referencing systems or conventions correctly.

A student who is used to relying on the teacher or the authority as the source of knowledge and truth may not understand the expectation to develop their own voice, position and perspective in their assessments. They may also struggle to challenge, question or evaluate the views or arguments of others.

A student who is used to receiving grades or marks based on a percentage or a numerical scale may not understand the expectation to receive feedback based on a rubric or a scheme that uses descriptive words or letters to indicate the level of performance. They may also struggle to interpret the feedback or use it for improvement.

Effective Design and Use of Assessment Rubrics

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Consider the cultural context and allow differentiation

Consider the diverse backgrounds and educational experiences of international students. Be aware of cultural differences in approaches to learning, assessment, and academic expectations. Recognize that there may be alternative approaches to problem-solving and knowledge presentation. Promote creativity and flexibility in assessment tasks, allowing for different cultural perspectives and learning styles.

Combine assessment documents

Provide the assessment brief and assessment rubric in a single document. This makes it easy for students to access everything they need in one physical or digital place. It can also enhance consistency and help the students see the alignment between the assessment task, learning outcomes and criteria for marking. Be mindful, however, that the document may be quite long, especially if the task or the rubric has many components or details. Use sections or subheadings to help students navigate it.

Presenting assessment rubrics

Present assessment rubrics on one page as far as possible. Students expressed a preference for rubrics that read from left to right, with left-columns pertaining to the highest grades and descend from high to low. Aim for precise descriptors that build on each other to avoid repetition and wordiness, which cater to students' desire to skim the rubric and home in on the criteria and descriptors that align with their focus at that time. Colour code criteria or columns in ways that differentiate skills, competencies or standards.

Clear and transparent communication

Provide detailed instructions and explanations of assessment criteria and expectations. Clearly define grading scales, assessment weightage, criteria weightage and performance indicators. Simplify language in rubrics to enhance comprehension; avoid evaluative language in performance indicators (e.g., excellent breadth of research), rather use plain language (e.g., comments on findings from sources beyond recommended course material).

Explain the scale and the standards

Include the full range of standards. Students may need clarity on how marks are allocated on a stepped marking, or 0-100 scale. They may not be familiar with the requirements to pass or the interpretation of good and excellent work against these standards, which may be higher or lower than the standards they are used to. Include all standards, breaking down the highest ranges in your rubric. Even if you explain to students that it is less common, but not impossible, to achieve the highest grades, they appreciate exposure to the requirements.

Address language and communication challenges

Facilitate opportunities for discussion of the rubric's language and assessment expectations. Foster an inclusive and supportive classroom environment that values diverse perspectives. Encourage students to seek clarification and ask questions regarding assessment criteria. Share additional resources, including online guides, glossaries, dictionaries, tutorials, or videos on assessment expectations where possible.

Promote engagement with the rubric

Refer to the rubric at relevant points in the course. This may be the beginning, half-way point and just before the submission or revision period commences. Students may forget that the rubric is available and appreciate reminders at key stages when preparing for their assessment (even at the last minute!). Incorporate activities into your teaching to engage students with the rubric such as peer assessment and feedback. Encourage students to assess each other's work against the rubric and to engage in constructive feedback and discussions based on the rubric's criteria.

Provide examples, exemplars or model answers

Examples of work or model answers illustrate expectations and academic judgement in different ways. Use examples (mixed achievement levels), exemplars (ideal examples of standards judged by the teacher) or model answers (from previous work or teacher generated) to help students understand how to apply rubrics, to identify how evidence of performance on learning outcomes manifests and to facilitate their learning. Showcase diverse examples to cater to various cultural perspectives and approaches.

Encourage self-reflection and self-assessment

Provide opportunities for students to reflect on their own learning progress. Encourage students to evaluate their work based on the provided rubrics before submission. Help students to identify where they may have delivered on similar learning outcomes or had their learning judged against similar criteria in previous assessments. Give students chances to practice and to draw parallel to other types of assessment that may require the same skills.

Encourage students to take up additional support

Many students are not aware of all the support services on offer. Those who are, value a reminder at times they are likely to use those services the most. Students can take advantage of academic support services available around the university, such as the library and its academic advisors, in-session English for Academic Purposes courses, academic skills workshops or even the student union for more support.

Seek student feedback

Regularly gather feedback from international students to improve the quality and clarity of the assessment communication, by identifying any gaps, misunderstandings, or ambiguities that might affect the students' performance. Encourage open communication about the content, design and delivery and suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of rubrics. Use this feedback to adapt assessment communication, enhance dialogue and interaction with international students.

Continued Professional development

Participating in ongoing training can improve your knowledge related to assessment practice, help you reflect on the assumptions, biases and expectations that influence your communication and learn from the experiences and perspectives of others. Professional development opportunities related to intercultural competence; equality, diversity and inclusion; universal design for learning and assessment; and effective assessment practices can enhance your use of assessment rubrics.

Using Exemplars to Help International Students Understand Assessment

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Providing international students with examples of marked work can help them to understand the assessment criteria and internalise assessment expectations in the following ways:



Examples of marked work can show international students what a good or a bad performance looks like, and what features or elements are rewarded or penalised by the markers. This can help them to visualise the standards and expectations for their own work and avoid common mistakes or pitfalls.



Examples of marked work can show international students how the assessment criteria and rubric are applied in practice, and how the marks or grades are awarded for each criterion and each level of performance. This can help them to comprehend the meaning and significance of the criteria and rubric, and how they relate to the learning outcomes and the assessment brief.



Examples of marked work can show international students how to structure, organise and present their work in an appropriate and effective way, and how to use language, style and tone that suit the purpose, audience and discipline of their assessments. This can help them to improve their writing and communication skills and enhance their confidence and competence.



Examples of marked work can show international students how to use evidence, analysis, examples and references to support their arguments, claims or points, and how to demonstrate critical thinking, originality and creativity in their assessments. This can help them to develop their research and reasoning skills, and express their own voice, position and perspective.

When using exemplars:



Select exemplars carefully to ensure that they are relevant, representative and realistic. Choose exemplars that illustrate the range and diversity of possible responses, not just the best or the worst ones. Avoid using outdated or inappropriate exemplars that may confuse or mislead students. Seek permission from former students or colleagues before using their work as exemplars.



Annotate exemplars clearly to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each response, and most importantly, how they relate to the assessment criteria and rubric. Use comments, symbols, colours or codes to draw attention to the key features, elements or errors of each exemplar. Explain why each exemplar received a certain mark or grade, and what could be done to improve it or share the prior feedback.



Use exemplars interactively to engage students in the analysis and evaluation of the work. Encourage students to compare and contrast different exemplars, and to justify their judgements based on the criteria and rubric. Ask students to identify similarities and differences between their own work and the exemplars, and to reflect on their own learning and improvement. Provide opportunities for students to ask questions or seek clarification about the exemplars.



Review exemplars regularly to ensure that they are still valid, reliable and consistent with the current assessment task, criteria and rubric. Update or replace exemplars as needed, based on the feedback from students, markers or moderators. Evaluate the effectiveness of using exemplars in enhancing student learning and performance and make adjustments accordingly.

Examples

Examples are generic or hypothetical illustrations of a particular type or genre of assessment, such as an essay, a report, a presentation, etc. They are usually constructed by teachers or experts to show students the general features, structure, format and language of the assessment task. They may or may not be accompanied by assessment criteria or rubrics, and they may or may not be graded or marked. Examples can help students to familiarise themselves with the assessment task and its requirements, and to plan and organise their own work accordingly.

Exemplars

Exemplars are specific or authentic samples of student work from previous cohorts (anonymised and with permission) or teacher-constructed samples (based on their extensive experience of the kinds of responses and common mistakes students make). They are usually selected to represent different levels of quality or competence, such as high, medium or low, or according to a marking scale, such as A, B, C, etc. They are always accompanied by assessment criteria or rubrics, and they are always graded or marked. Exemplars can help students to understand the standards and expectations for their own work, and to evaluate and improve their own work accordingly.