

Creating School-wide Grading Descriptors

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Abstract

Grading descriptors in higher education are essential tools that provide clear criteria for assessing student performance. They offer detailed descriptions of the standards expected for each grade, ensuring consistency, equity and transparency in evaluation (Grainger, Purnell and Zipf, 2008). This approach moves away from norm-referenced assessment, where students are compared to each other, towards criterion-referenced assessment, focusing on the quality of work and alignment with the intended learning outcomes of the assessment. Research by Sadler (2005) highlights the importance of these descriptors in enhancing the reliability and validity of assessments. It is also essential for providing students with clear feedback on how they can improve their work to achieve higher grades. Grading descriptors can be broad (at institutional level) or narrow (at assessment level) or somewhere in between. Most HEI's in the UK have institutional level descriptors which are readily available on their websites. London Met does not presently have these. The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) provides descriptors by level but does not specify what is expected for the grade classifications within each level, except for L6 where detailed descriptors are provided for a fail, 3rd class, 2:2, 2:1 and 1st class honours degree (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2024). These descriptors outline what is expected at the exit level only and is broad to the qualifications at each level. In 2021, the Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC) (2021) provided more focused descriptions, aligned with the FHEQ, detailing characteristics and context of learning at each level. They can be used to help develop learning outcomes, setting standards and expectations, informing curriculum design and importantly guiding assessment criteria. The aim of this work was to use the FHEQ and SEEC guidelines, to create a broad set of grading descriptors which could be used as a basis for the development of local subject or assessment descriptors. This work also experimented with the use of AI, along with the student voice, in creating a useful and robust set of descriptors.

Reflective Commentary

Creating this presentation highlighted the complexities involved in developing grading descriptors. To draw from reputable, appropriate sources I was required to extract not only specific language but also to blend different sources and consider all the different lenses that are used in the HE sector. This led to quite generic descriptors which was one of the comments I received from the audience. It is true that these are purposefully generic to be applicable across different subject areas and assessment types. The audience were receptive to this idea and some members were excited and challenged by the prospect of adapting these descriptors for subject-specific use. I also explained that I hope to create a repository of assessment descriptors within the School of Human Sciences for different types of assessments (e.g. presentations, lab reports, case studies) to share good practice and enable consistency. The discussions and questions confirmed my belief that these are essential tools to ensure parity and that standards are upheld. It was useful to know of some of the potential issues with using grading descriptors on Weblearn, which encouraged me to experiment with possible solutions and has enabled further discussions with Centre for Teaching Enhancement and the development of a Community of Practice for wider conversations.

References

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Biographical note

Jo Jenkins is presently Head of Student Experience and Academic Outcomes for the School of Human Sciences. She is a University Teaching Fellow and Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her background includes lecturing on BSc and MSc Sports courses, with a particular interest in delivering Professional, Core and Transferable skills for Sports students. Jo has been extensively involved in course developments within Health Sciences and supports colleagues across the School to

improve their courses. She has also chaired course validations across the University, as well as contributing to TNE reviews and international partnerships.

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AI declaration

Chat GPT and Deep Seek were used to develop the grading descriptors by asking these LLMs to adapt descriptors for other levels (which were then amended). This was discussed within the presentation. The author takes full responsibility for the final content of the publication.