

Excerpt from the final report of the Assessment Project in School of Politics and International Relations

Staff workshops around the use of assessment criteria

Staff workshops, held in two separate semesters – 2 November 2011 and 28 March 2012 – took further the issues raised by the audit. The purpose of these workshops was to facilitate discussions among staff on marking practices highlighting the new marking criteria. They were provided with a single piece of coursework on both occasions and were asked to mark prior to the workshop and then reflect on their reasons for arriving at the mark and discuss the content of their feedback using the new marking criteria and level descriptors. In essence, they were asked to respond to the following set of questions in order to facilitate the discussion:

1. How are we using the new headings, criteria and descriptors to construct our written feedback to students? What are the best ways of doing so?
2. How suitable have we found the new criteria in formulating our feedback? Is there anything superfluous/missing?
3. How suitable is the interim coversheet to help guide marking and feedback? What changes would be worthwhile?

Both workshops were well attended and a representative from the Thinking Writing Team was present on both occasions. Results from these workshops and focus groups were collated. Generally, the participants found the new marking criteria and level descriptors useful and a step forward in ensuring better use of the full range of marks. However, there were some concerns highlighted in their discussions with regard to the extent of the usage of the six categories (*Task Fulfilment, Research, Quality of Argument, Structure, Presentation and Representation of Sources*) as listed in the Essay Coversheet (Appendix B). The discussions that followed looked into the usefulness and language of the marking criteria in providing meaningful and reflective feedback to students. One of the main concerns highlighted was about the extent to which these categories limited the ability of the markers to respond substantively and meaningfully to students' essays per se. For instance, the category 'task fulfilment' was considered less important compared with other categories in formulating qualitative feedback and arguably, should carry less weight in guiding the marker to arrive at a decision on giving a numerical value to that piece of work. Moreover, whilst there was an artificial division of components of marks based on the six categories, there was some overlap between categories such as 'research' and 'quality of argument'.

Some tutors found the six categories in the marking criteria as a useful tool in framing a qualitative feedback on the essays but some felt constrained by the same categories in giving a constructive and critical feedback on the content of the essay. They argued that if they could use a tick box to address all six categories in their feedback, they would be able to give a more substantive feedback on the academic content of the essay. At the staff workshop, it was found that these different approaches to using the marking criteria lead to some marked variations in the feedback of sample essays. It was suggested that one of the ways to avoid such anomalies in grading and feedback was to 'bring back' the tick-box grid for the markers so they could address the six categories of the criteria there. The

rationale was that this exercise would enable them to have enough flexibility in providing students with a more substantive and qualitative feedback on their essays.

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