

Retraction Notice

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Retraction initiative (multiple responses allowed):

- All authors
- Some of the authors
- Editor

Date initiative was launched: 2025-11-10.

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- Unreliable findings
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- were found to be overall invalid.

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* Also called duplicate or repetitive publication. Definition: ‘Publishing or attempting to publish substantially the same work more than once’.

History

Expression of Concern:

 yes, date: yyyy-mm-dd no**Correction:** yes, date: yyyy-mm-dd no**Comment:**

The Editors of the Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education are retracting this article following notification by the author and subsequent confirmation from York St John University. The research was conducted without the required institutional ethical approval, and the article breached participant confidentiality and data use agreements. In making this decision the Editorial Board follows [COPE's Retraction Guidelines](#) and the internationally accepted standards of publication ethics. The aim of this retraction is to correct the academic record and promote furthering scholarly integrity. The Editors regret that these violations were not identified during the peer review process and would like to extend sincere apologies for any inconvenience this retraction may have caused.



RETRACTED: Refreshing our institution's Generic Assessment Descriptors

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Abstract

This paper describes how and why we refreshed our Generic Assessment Descriptors (GAD) at York St John University. Focusing this paper on the most meaningful changes, these included; removing subjective terms; rewriting descriptors for collaboration to focus on positive behaviours; broadening our scope of communication to allow for a range of modes of communication while enhancing the focus on audience and media; and an overall review of the accessibility of the language, terms, and expectations (Dawson, 2021; Gonsalves, 2023; Gonsalves and Pearson, 2023). For our colleagues, we refreshed the GAD to encourage and enable them to design learning that is active, inclusive, and allows for assessments to be open for students to follow their passion and intrinsic motivations. Using a Competency-Based Education (QAA, 2023) approach put the expectations into terms of what the students must demonstrate. Removing deficit language from the descriptors focused assessment (and learning) towards celebrating the achievements of students, and not the expectations of the assessor. The refreshed GAD was beta tested by early adopters in 2023-24 and was rolled out across the University in academic year 2024-25. Feedback from the early adopters included a better use of the full range of marks and students commenting that they felt more positive about the feedback they have been receiving.

Keywords: assessment; competency-based; learning-tool; collaboration; rubrics; communication.



Introduction

An institution's assessment descriptors are crucial not only for quality assurance of assessment parity, but they also set the tone and expectations of teaching and learning in a way that other policies and frameworks cannot. Assessment carries a great weight for both staff and students, resulting in many hours of anxiety which could be better spent teaching and learning. The expectations, tone, and accessibility of the institutes assessment criteria should be transferred into assessment rubrics and therefore can (and should) be used as a tool for learning (Andrade, 2023).

At York St John University (YSJ), we refer to our institutional assessment criteria as the Generic Assessment Descriptors or GADs. We have a GAD for each level of study (Framework for Higher Education Qualifications levels 3-7).

Why refresh?

I joined YSJ in February 2023 as a Lecturer in Academic Practice in the Teaching and Learning Enhancement team. One of the first tasks I was given was to 'refresh the GADs' to ensure consistency as part of the university's Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Strategy 2022-23. This task was part of the Supporting the Assessment Journey strand of the strategy and was in response to 'Poor outcomes for students who don't submit first attempts [and] worsening retention'. In keeping with other practices and strategies at YSJ of co-creation and compassionate pedagogy (Hamilton and Petty, 2023), I undertook this work as a facilitator between colleagues and students, often adopting the roles and techniques of a mediator or an action learning facilitator (Pedler and Abbott, 2013). Conversations often revolved around a process of sharing experiences, evaluating their impact, analysing the values, and concluding what values and actions we wanted to promote. Two significant examples of how we applied these principles can be seen in the refresh of the Collaborative Skills and Communication. While there was no formalised team, as a consistent and demarcated entity, I approached my role as a facilitator by ensuring that those groups of stakeholders were involved, provided input, and were given ample opportunities to consult at key stages of the project. When I refer to 'we' henceforth, it is those engagements that I am referring to.

At YSJ, the Generic Assessment Descriptors operate as the institutional guidance for colleagues designing assessment rubrics. These GADs (as an institutional level rubric) ensure parity of assessment decisions in those trickier open-ended assessments (such as essays) where assessors must make a judgement on the quality of the submission, considering the spectrum of assessment formats to run from objective to subjective, with exams at one end and a creative artefact at the other (respectively). I refer to the compliancy end (objective) as bricks – in which each response is uniformly similar – and snowflakes (subjective) at the other end – in which each response is unique to the student. Often, exams require the least amount of guidance on assessment decisions as these are composed of right and wrong answers. As such, it is in those snowflake assessments where the assessor is required to make a judgement on the quality of the work that is unique. This is the challenge of institutional assessment criteria; to guide the process of assessment decisions but not dictate.

At YSJ, we have performed well in regard to assessment decisions (as indicated in National Student Survey and institutional surveys (Office for Students, 2024)) but there was inconsistencies of practices around assessment standards between our schools (not all bad, but inconsistent) and so the opportunity to refresh the GADs was an exercise to enhance the process. We found many of our colleagues using their rubrics (often referred to as assessment marking criteria at YSJ) with students as a learning map. In this way, they were enacting the practice advocated by scholars such as Andrade (2023) to use rubrics as a learning tool, and not just an assessment tool. In their conversations with students, colleagues would have to describe, explain, and/or negotiate what was meant by terms such as 'good understanding' and 'satisfactory analysis'. We aimed to support and enhance this dialogue by applying competence-based language to the descriptors.

What and how we refreshed

Competency-based language became essential to our approach to the language of assessment, as competence is the accomplishment (a 'worthy performance') while competencies are the characteristics – knowledge skills, and behaviours – that are used to accomplish assessments (cf. Teodorescu, 2006). As such, a Competency-Based Education (CBE) (see Lawrence, Morrell and Scott, 2023; QAA, 2023) approach to rubrics required us to write descriptors that emphasise the competencies (knowledge, skills, and

behaviours) that our students should be engaging in to produce competent results. A driving aspect of CBE in our work was that there should be '[t]ransparency of learning expectations' (Levine and Patrick, 2019. p.4). Refreshing the descriptors to a CBE approach puts the expectations into terms of what the students must demonstrate, thereby reducing the emphasis of valuing by the assessor. This decentring of the assessor to focus on the student as an individual also aids assessment designers to utilise diversified assessment processes and products, allowing for more interesting and enjoyable work to produce and assess.

We also removed the deficit language from our descriptors to focus assessment (and learning) towards celebrating the achievements of students (Grainger and Dann, 2020; Gonsalves, 2023): 'Deficit-based approaches focus on the weaknesses within individuals or groups and how interventions may be able to *correct* for these weaknesses' (Gilani, 2024, p.18 my emphasis). Deficit terms in rubrics – such as 'lacking clarity' – infer that there is an ideal response, such as the perfect essay. Whether subtly or explicitly, this can coerce students to look for the 'right' answer and for assessors to deduct marks for responses that do not conform to their 'perfect response'. If all students are working to achieve a high first/distinction under a deficit marking scheme, it seems logical that they will all be submitting similar work, plagiarising the assessor's ideal response. Such practices occur when we give more attention to assessment validity than meaningful learning (Dawson, 2021). Further to this, the removal of the deficit language allowed for more focused and condensed descriptors which build on one another as scaffolded learning. In this way each descriptor articulates what a student must do to achieve that degree of success in that criterion.

Reflecting on both the skills and the behaviours (competencies) that are most often associated with successful collaboration (competence), we discussed our experiences, our expectations, the literature and some of the challenges in assessed collaborations. From these discussions, we distilled what we considered to be the desired qualities of a collaborator and how we felt these could be best articulated in our GADs to promote students to undertake the appropriate actions and for assessors to recognise those actions. Similarly, with Communication, we reviewed the then current descriptors, challenging some of the terms and sharing experiences which ran counter to the expectations of those descriptors (such as only focusing on written and verbal communication). Values were established and actions towards these values were agreed

and written as our refreshed criterion for Communication. Below I will describe and explain in detail the processes for these two criteria.

Collaboration

For students, the biggest worry and challenge in assessed collaborations was the disparity of effort to reward from individuals. We agreed that this issue was most prominent when the assessment only looked at the product of a collaboration (such as a group presentation) and no evidence of the process was considered (such as peer-reviews, portfolios, or reflective accounts). We concluded that the term 'leadership' should be avoided as this could be (based on experiences shared) an accidental inference to cause behaviours that were actually counter-productive to collaboration (such as dictating, controlling, coercive negotiation, and such). These behaviours were felt to be a reaction to an individualistic approach, while intentions often wished to promote a supportive, community-orientated mindset in collaborative work. We discussed the positive attributes, qualities and actions of collaborators and leaders that we wished to promote. In retrospective, our goal was to develop behaviours that progressed as:

1. Inactive.
2. Passive.
3. Active.
4. Self-aware.
5. Supportive.

To assure the consistency of the quality we were proposing, we referred to the guidance of the OfS' Conditions B4: Assessment and Awards, which states that to be awarded a third at level 6 (FHEQ), '[t]he student has demonstrated a capability of making useful contributions to group discussions and/or project work' (Office for Students, 2022a, p.19) and the guidance of SEEC (South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer) that the student '[a]pplies and develops selected interpersonal, team and networking skills to enhance team performance' (SEEC, 2021, p.15). We further discussed how we have seen these results enacted in our experiences as staff and students and after several rounds of consultation with our colleagues, Student Union representatives, and senior management we arrived at the following criterion for Collaboration (excluding Fail and Borderline Fail for brevity) (Table 1).

Table 1. Collaboration criterion.

	Collaboration
Pass – Third	This work demonstrates an ability to cooperate/negotiate with others mostly as directed to achieve shared outcomes which exceed the potential of working independently. The work shows an awareness of the differences that result from working with different team members.
2:2	The work demonstrates an ability to cooperate/negotiate with others, and to contribute effectively to collaborative tasks to achieve productive outcomes as a team. The work shows an appreciation of the differences that result from working with different team members.
2:1	The work demonstrates effective cooperation/constructive negotiation with others. It recognises, evaluates, and adapts the individual's role to best achieve the shared goals and future outcomes of the team. The work evidences an engagement with the differences that result from working with diverse team members and an openness to change.
First	The work recognises and evaluates the strengths and abilities of the team, as well as the opportunities and challenges of the collaborative work. The work develops and deploys additional resources (professional/specialist) and embraces of the differences that result from working with diverse team members.
High First	The work recognises, critically evaluates , and develops the individual's role and practice, and supports/leads similar developments amongst the team . The work uses teamwork in its approach to community building and actively embraces the differences that result from working with diverse team members and other perspectives.

A criticism that could potential come from these descriptors is that it is very difficult (or impossible) to assess these interactions, attributes, or processes from the standard formats such as a group presentation. This would clearly align with the worries of students mentioned above. Such a criticism would be of the assessment design, not of the descriptors. However, the descriptors had to be written to allow for the genuine possibility

of the collaborations failing, even if the student(s) do the right things individually. This can be facilitated by focusing the assessment away from the product and towards the skills and behaviours applied in the process.

Communication

The first point of agreement was to allow for a broader definition than 'written and verbal' communication to include modes such as gestural, numerical, coding, illustrative, musical, and so forth without barriers. Our discussions explored the range of current and possible practices such as essays, blogs, presentations, podcasts, vlogs, websites, compositions, performances, and so forth, again without barriers. We also discussed the potential danger of the hidden curriculum approach, communicating directly to the preferences of the assessor. While it can certainly be beneficial to learn how to communicate to a very specific audience – such as the assessor – the dangers are that students may not recognise the transferable skills and behaviours of this approach, making them redundant. Or they may restrict their communication skills to address an academic audience which may be counter to the authenticity of their experiences beyond academia. As such, we discussed the range of current and potential audiences that works could be directed to (whether performed hypothetically or to an actual audience).

From these discussions, we surmised that what was generic to all forms of communication was how these addressed the mode (for example, written, verbal, illustrative), medium (for example, essays, podcasts, computer programs, storyboards) and the audience (for example, academic, peer, non-/specialist, lay-persons). We agreed that the most successful communications and communicators were not themselves complex or challenging. In fact, the most effective communicators could explain complex topics in very simple and accessible language.

As above, we referred to the OfS guidance which states that to achieve a Third at FHEQ level 6, '[t]he student can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions verbally, electronically and in writing, with clear expression and style. They have also demonstrated numeracy and digital literacy skills' (Office for Students, 2022, p.19). And SEEC, who suggest that students '[o]rganise and communicate specialist and inter-related information, using selected criteria, to audiences in complex contexts' (SEEC, 2021, p.15). Our following criterion for communication attempts to describe to the student how they can

progress their communication skills by developing their understanding and applications within how they address the mode, medium, and audience. Our intention is that either the assignment brief will articulate these parameters (such as an academic essay for the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*) or that students will be required to articulate the mode, medium, and audience, and how they have addressed these.

Table 2. Communication criterion.

	Communication
Pass – Third	The work is largely comprehensible. It shows an awareness of relevant technologies and has attempted to use the appropriate writing or presentation style to meet the expectations of an audience.
2:2	The work is clear, coherent , and communicates appropriately to its intended audience . It shows an appreciation of relevant technologies and uses the appropriate writing or presentation style.
2:1	The work engages with relevant technologies and communicates using technically proficient language appropriate to the medium and its intended audience.
First	The work communicates persuasively and engages ethically with relevant technology. It communicates complex ideas in ways that would be accessible to both specialist and non-specialist audiences .
High First	The work communicates with a logical flow . It successfully communicates complex ideas in ways that are understandable to a range of audiences. The work uses relevant technology in a socially responsible way.

Conclusion

The refreshed GADs were launched university wide in semester one 2024-25. In 2023-24, a number of departments referred to an early version of the refreshed GAD to design their assessment marking criteria (rubrics) that they used when assessing students work. Their experiences have been monitored throughout the year to enhance the final refresh. These

colleagues have commented on the clarity of expectations, supporting them to use the full range of available grade boundaries with a reduced fear of their subjective judgements being called into question. Students have reported a clearer understanding of what is expected and how to achieve this and more readily accepted the assessment decisions. Students in one module even reported that they felt their feedback was also more positive and constructive – likely due to the removal of negative and deficit terms. As an early adopter, the Business Management department saw a significant improvement in the York Evaluative Survey (YES) (an internal student survey) on questions around the clarity and fairness of assessment (Table 3). The School's Learning and Teaching Lead attributed these improvements to the GAD and a unified coversheet (a corresponding project alongside the GAD) as no other significant changes were made to assessment practices in 2023-24.

Table 3. Business Management YES results.

Question	2021-22 % (n)	2022-23 % (n)	2023-24 % (n)
How clear are the marking criteria used to assess your work?	50% (28)	54.5% (44)	81% (84)
How fair is the marking and assessment on your course?	46.4% (28)	66.7 (42)	85.7% (84)

While a lot of the work described above may appear to revolve around the words and language of assessment descriptors, it should be acknowledged that the challenges are contextual and complex. When we change the words of the descriptors we are attempting to change mindsets, beliefs, practices, and cultures associated with assessment. Specifically in this work, we were aiming to demystify the expectations of assessors and to decentre the assessment in place of a meaningful learning experience. As academic and academic institutions, we can often be guilty of producing lengthy documents on our values, practices, and policies but to be effective in implementing change these have to be meaningful and actionable by our colleagues where it matters, in teaching, learning, and assessment.

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