

## **Fixed 'Formative-Specific' Assessment Rubrics and 'Formal' Formative Assessment: Evolving formative assessment processes for a large-scale international student-taught master's Education module**

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**Abstract** Assessment rubrics are a central component of developing students' assessment literacy. They are usually used both for the summative assessment of learning, and, formatively, to develop students' understanding of the standard of work required to be successful. The objective of this research was to evaluate the use of a 'formative-specific' assessment rubric designed for providing formative assessment feedback, and a distinct rubric designed for summative assessment. Data was collected through an online questionnaire and anecdotal conversations with colleagues and students. A total of 45 postgraduate students completed the questionnaire. The findings suggest that a 'formative-specific' assessment rubric contributes both to facilitating students' understandings of the level and quality of work required for postgraduate study and to developing their assessment literacy. The data also shows that the students found the summative assessment rubric useful

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in progressing to their next assignments in their master's level degree programme. More importantly, the study introduces the concept of a 'fixed-formal' formative assessment process.

**Keywords:** Rubrics, formative assessment, hidden curriculum, international students, innovative practice, Assessment-for-Learning, pedagogy.

## **Introduction**

Marking rubrics are increasingly being used globally in HE (hereinafter HE) (Dawson, 2017) primarily for the summative assessment of learning, yet increasingly for developing students' understanding of assessment requirements as part of formative assessment for learning processes. There is an established body of evidence suggesting that rubrics can: positively impact learning (Cockett and Jackson, 2018); facilitate students' assessment literacy (Gotch and French, 2014); contribute to ensuring improved inter-marker consistency in grading work (Jonsson and Svingby, 2007; Reddy and Andrade, 2010; Koris and Pello, 2020); contribute to transparency and fairness in assessment practices (Chan and Ho 2019; Grainger and Weir, 2020); improve students' perceptions of fairness and reduce perceptions of marker-bias (Chan and Ho, 2019); speed up the marking process for assessors and, particularly when used in conjunction with exemplars, facilitate students' improved understanding about the requirements and expectations of an assessment (ibid, 2020). They may also help reduce student anxiety about assessment through making the assessment process more transparent (Mansi, 2021). Well-designed rubrics can contribute to mitigating the negative effects of the hidden curriculum (Hinchcliffe, 2020). However,

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there are some negative aspects of rubrics identified in the literature. Cockett and Jackson (2018) in a review of their use in HE found students reported they could be restrictive as they may reduce creativity in assessments and may increase assessment-related stress. Though, in contrast, Bono and Suárez-Pellicioni, (2017) found that rubrics reduced students' negative emotions such as anxiety.

### **Rubric: definition and features**

Reddy and Andrade (2010, p.435) suggest that "Educators tend to define the word 'rubric' in slightly different ways. A commonly used definition is a document that articulates the expectations for an assignment by listing the criteria or what counts and describing levels of quality from excellent to poor (Andrade, 2000; Stiggins 2001; Arter and Chappuis 2007). At its simplest, an assessment rubric is a marking template in a grid format, with descriptors for the different grades awarded. A good rubric has three features: evaluation criteria, quality definitions and a scoring or grading strategy (Reddy and Andrade, 2010). To that we would add, an effective rubric should use transparent and inclusive 'student-friendly' language that is objective and, as far as possible, not open to subjective interpretation by different markers.

### **The Study's contribution to the field**

Our study offers two original and unique contributions to the growing field of research into assessment rubrics that existing studies have not previously engaged with, and, as such, moves the field forward. Firstly, our use of a 'formative-specific' rubric that was developed specifically for a formative assessment mid-way in the module and was different to the rubric used for summative assessment at the end of it, and secondly, a fixed formal formative assessment process and point, mid-way through the module. A fixed formative assessment process refers to a structured way of

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evaluating students based on providing clear criteria that are consistent and easy to grade on a large scale, with a focus on measurable outcomes of learning (Brookhart, 2010). For our research project the term 'fixed' also refers to the fact that the formative assessment has a fixed deadline for submission.

## **Background and Rationale for the research**

### ***Background***

The research was conducted at a red-brick non-aligned (i.e. one not part of the Russell Group, University Alliance, million+ group, Guild HE, Cathedrals Group or the 1994 Group) university in the north of England with students studying a module on the postgraduate taught masters in the School of Education. The programme attracts a significant number of international students, mainly from West Africa, with student numbers typically around 230 per year. The Contemporary and Critical Perspectives in Education (CCPE) module is mandatory for all taught master's students studying on three different pathways. The format for the module includes a large group face-to-face lecture followed by smaller-group (c.25 students each) lecturer-facilitated workshops. The module is taught in the first trimester when most students are new to the UK. All course materials are provided through the university's digital Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), CANVAS, with assessments submitted online and feedback provided online via 'Speedgrader,' along with one-to-one feedback tutorials at the request of each student. Assignments are automatically run through a plagiarism checker, Turnitin, an online originality checking and plagiarism prevention service that checks work for citation mistakes or copying. The summative assessment

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for the module was a 3000-word essay critique of an academic journal article that related to the taught content. Students were provided with a list of specific journal articles to choose from. The formative assessment was a shorter, 750-word mini-critique of a specified academic journal article with students provided with a list of articles to choose from. This supported the development of the skills students would need to utilize in order to be successful in the summative assessment. The journal articles were different for the summative and formative assessment.

For the purposes of this research we use the UK Quality Assurance Agency definition of formative assessment as one that “has a developmental purpose and is designed to help learners learn more effectively by giving them feedback on their performance and on how it can be improved/or maintained” (QAA, 2013, p.23) and summative assessment as that which is “used to indicate the extent of a learner’s success in meeting the assessment criteria used to gauge the intended learning outcomes of a module or programme” (QAA, 2013, p.24). We explained to students about the differences between formative and summative assessment and that a different rubric would be used for formative and summative assessments. We did not tell students how they should use the rubrics, instead we chose to say to them that they may wish to read and understand the rubrics before commencing their assessed work, and we indicated that we strongly encouraged them to do this. We use the term assessment literacy as being a “multifaceted construct that involves students understanding assessment’s principles, practices, and purposes” (Holmes, 2024, p.26). which encompasses “a range of different competencies, including, among other things: understanding the purposes and types of different assessments, interpreting assessment requirements, and marking criteria correctly, using marking criteria to inform learning, and receiving and acting upon feedback i.e. utilizing the information from feedback to inform future learning” (ibid, p 26).

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***Rationale***

Prior to 2022/23 a standard departmental marking and assessment template was used for summative assessment, with formative assessment based on this and on informal in-class and small-group or individual tutorials. There was no fixed submission point/deadline for the formative assessment process within the twelve-week module delivery period and not all of the students engaged with the process. Two staff delivered the module and coordinated assessment, supported by four staff in marking and providing feedback to students using a standard departmental marking grid. In 2022-2023 a further eight staff provided support for tutorial workshops, with all 10 staff assessing student work. Due to the increase in staff involved in assessment we were concerned about potential differences between markers. We were interested in the clarity and consistency of marking (summative grades), inter-marker reliability, and feedback consistency, particularly in respect of new members of staff who had not previously worked on the programme. We also wanted to take account of how we could most effectively articulate standards and requirements, both to markers and, through formative feedback, to international students who typically will not have previously studied within the UK university system and are not cognizant of the hidden curriculum, the taken-for-granted expectations in respect of the requirements of university study and assessed work in the UK (Snyder, 1973; Giroux, 1983; Hinchcliffe, 2020). This was particularly important as the university where the research was conducted has an inclusive education framework which includes inclusive assessment and feedback processes. Given the increase in the number of staff involved in marking we wanted to try and standardize the amount, and type, of both formative and summative feedback provided by the staff and help develop both students' assessment literacy and feedback literacy (Price et al., 2012;

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Carless and Boud, 2018; Malecka, Boud and Carless, 2020; Nieminen and Carless, 2023; Pitt and Winstone, 2023).

### **Development and Introduction of a ‘formative-specific’ rubric**

Our previous experience of using rubrics designed for the summative assessment of learning has led us to recognize that one designed for a summative assessment at the end of a module would not be able to serve the purpose of providing high-quality developmental feedback as effectively as one developed specifically for that purpose and used at mid-point in the module. We identified that it is unrealistic to expect students to have attained, and be able to fully evidence, the intended learning outcomes/competences they reach at the end of a module, at a mid-point in it. We therefore questioned the validity, or fitness-for-purpose, of using a rubric designed for the summative assessment of learning at the end of a module, to be able to provide high-quality formative developmental feedback during it. This led to the decision to design and introduce a ‘formative-specific’ rubric designed to provide mid-module developmental formative feedback - see supplementary data for both rubrics.

We had two main aims in introducing the formative-specific rubric. Our primary aim was to support and develop students’ understandings of the expectations of the level and quality of work expected of postgraduate students studying for a qualification within the British HE system. Our secondary aim was to contribute to standardizing the amount and type of inter-marker formative feedback provided by a relatively large (n=10) team of staff.

### **Rationale for introducing a ‘formal’ formative assessment in the module.**

Our previous experiences with formative feedback processes had led us to recognize that not all students would engage with them because the work did not count towards

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their grade; and that for contemporary students what is assessed effectively defines and determines what they learn, as was identified by Ramsden (1992) yet is still valid. Our experience has also led us to recognize that not infrequently formative assessment may be downplayed within curriculum delivery and is typically less formal than summative assessment processes, for example: it may not have a scheduled submission date, it may be optional, its importance may not be recognized by students, staff feedback may be less formal, often provided verbally in-class rather than in writing. We recognize that the practice of assessment for learning is not clearly delineated and is, arguably, somewhat unclear and potentially confused (McDowell et al., 2011). Black, (2006, p.11) for example argues that it is a “free brand-name to attach to any practice”. It is notable that Black and Wiliam (1998, p.8), influential proponents of Assessment for Learning (AfL) pedagogy, originally suggested that formative assessment referred to, “all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” i.e. it was not limited to formal assessment processes. Whilst Klenowski (2009) subsequently developed what Wiliam (2011) labelled as being a ‘second generation’ definition of AfL, identifying that it was, “part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning” (Klenowski, 2009, p.264).

We suggest that formative assessments are, in much HE practice, inherently very informal. This informality leads to some students, and arguably some staff, choosing to disregard or downplay their importance and not engage with them. Student lack of engagement with formative assessment tasks is not unique to our programme. Finch (2024) identifies that many students do not submit at all, nor do they make a serious

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attempt to engage. Previous experience, with both UK and international students, has shown us that having informal formative feedback processes has not always been successful as some students did not engage because they perceived the assessment to be optional or unimportant as it was not graded, and no academic credit was attached to it. This meant that students choose to ignore the opportunity for formative developmental feedback.

Bearing in mind the majority of international students were not used to the concept of receiving formative feedback and were typically used only to summative end-of-module exams, where they received a grade without feedback (Awokulu, 2017; Okoye, 2023) we wanted to ensure that learners were definitely engaging with the formative assessment process and had a clear opportunity to receive and respond to feedback prior to submitting the end-of-module summative assessment. We wanted to better facilitate international students' expectations and understandings of the quality and standard of academic work required to be successful in the assessment in a UK university. Explicit assessment criteria can support students to consider what they are aiming for and how this can be achieved from the perspective of a marker (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006), so their learning outcomes move beyond a purely cognitive product, to the development of metacognition (Swaffield, 2011) and assessment literacy (Smith et al., 2011; Price et al., 2012).

We recognized the need, because of the background of the students, to encourage engagement, through the implementation of a 'formal' formative assessment process, and introducing a 'fixed' deadline for submission would, we believed contribute to this, though we acknowledge that we could not require students to; engagement was still optional. To ensure that students were engaged with the process the 'formal' formative assessment process we required them to submit a piece of written work, a 750-word mini-critique of a selected academic journal article, through the VLE, on a specific date at mid-point in the module delivery. Students were provided with clear

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guidance about the formative assessment process and the formative-specific rubric was explained during a taught session prior to them starting their work. Although we could not oblige students to engage with this process, we presented it as being inherently integrated into the module's teaching and learning process. As such, this encouraged students to engage. 100% of the students did engage and we suggest that this figure is considerably higher than modules where the formative assessment process is less formal. Formatively assessed work was turned around by markers within two weeks (perhaps 'feedbackers' is a more appropriate term than 'markers' here as the work was not graded).

Our position in respect of formative feedback was that, in addition to the ongoing, everyday informal feedback in taught sessions and seminars, that a 'formal' fixed formative feedback process is one that is scheduled and timetabled into module delivery process, with a clear submission deadline specified for students and a specified deadline for 'feedbackers' to return the work.

**Rationale for introducing a summative assessment rubric**

In providing feedback to students, the literature on assessment identifies that staff may interpret marking criteria subjectively. Bloxham et al., (2016) found that, when grading work, assessors were inconsistent in: the criteria they used to assess the assignment; how they ranked assignments for each criterion; the relative importance of different criteria; the evidence they used to evaluate each criterion; their expectations of what level the assignment should be at and how they generated a grade from the collated evaluation of cues within the assignment. Previous work (Bloxham et al., 2011) has identified that assessors may allocate a grade without

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referring to assessment criteria and instead, use the criteria to justify the grade they have already decided. As Bloxham et al., (ibid, p.662) suggest,

*markers are not cynically referring to criteria post hoc in order to defend their judgements, but are using them to help refine 'hunch' decisions.....also some evidence that tutors used assessment criteria to help them turn a holistic grade decision into a justified grade decision; in other words, they appeared to have decided the grade before referring to the criteria, but sought support from the published criteria/standards to defend their decision.*

We wanted to avoid this phenomenon by providing the marking team with clear and explicit criteria in the form of a rubric. This was particularly important in the context of an increase in the size of the marking team and new staff being involved, as previously outlined. Staff were provided with an explanation for the introduction of the rubrics as a replacement for the existing marking scheme. They were asked to scrutinize the rubrics and make suggestions for its improvement. Several suggestions for improvement were provided and incorporated in the final rubrics used. As staff were familiar with and had used rubrics before, no training was required.

Our formative-specific and summative rubrics focused on five key areas: (i) critique – methodological and analytical, (ii) criticality – depth and level, (iii) referencing – amount, quality, accuracy, validity, relevancy, (iv) narrative flow, and (v) taking a position i.e., having a clear, substantiated argument. Our formative assessment rubric did not include specific grading criteria.

## **Methodology**

This study started out as a practice-based teaching intervention. We subsequently used an action research approach, along with informal discussion. Action research

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allows teachers to be engaged in the study of their own teaching and students' learning. As a research-framework, action research was utilized because it is an extension of reflective practice since critical reflection on practice feeds the research findings (Schön, 1983). It allows researchers to address issues relevant to their practice, effect and enact change based on evidence-based research, and actively involve participants in the research process (Denscombe, 1998). Informal discussion (Swain and King, 2022) is a legitimate qualitative research method, particularly when used to complement and add to more formally collected data, adding context and enriching data (Swain and Spire 2020; Swain and King 2022). An action research methodology allowed us to engage in the study, reflect on our own teaching (Schön, 1983), address an issue relevant to our practice i.e., the use of rubrics and involve our students in the research process (Denscombe, 1998). These actions contributed to achieving our research aim.

## **Method**

At the end of the module, after summative feedback and grades had been provided to the students, a questionnaire was used to gauge the impact of the use of the rubrics. It was sent to an opportunity sample of 98 members of the cohort via the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) online survey tool. The JISC online survey is a tool for educational research that allows the creation, distribution, and analysis of surveys online (Online Surveys – survey tool designed for Academic Research, Education and Public Sector organisations [jisc.ac.uk](http://jisc.ac.uk)).

The response rate was just under 50% (n=45). Students were invited to complete the online questionnaire and told it should take no more than 10-15 minutes. They were

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also asked to indicate near the end of the online questionnaire their willingness to participate in a one-to-one follow-up interview via MS Teams: none volunteered. Students were told participating in the research had no bearing on any future grades they would be awarded.

The questionnaire primarily contained closed questions about the student experience with open text boxes for expansion and further commentary to determine perceived effectiveness of the rubrics to the student experience and impact on their assignments. A copy of the questionnaire can be requested from the authors if desired. As part of our action research approach, we also utilized, where we deemed it to be appropriate, information derived from informal conversation with students in-class and from tutorial meetings (i.e., anecdotal evidence). The usefulness of this method to address the issue of this research can be seen in several ways, but most importantly, the method enabled us to achieve our research aim (Creswell and Clark, 2011).

### **Ethics and Positionality**

The research was conducted following relevant ethical requirements, with ethical approval from the university ethics committee, in line with the BERA (2018) requirements. This covered consent, transparency, the right to withdraw, incentives, harm arising from participation in research, privacy and data storage and disclosure. By agreeing to participate by completing the online questionnaire and checking the appropriate box on the JISC system, students gave their consent indicating that they had read a participant information sheet, understood it, and agreed to participate in all aspects of the research.

The three researchers recognize that collectively as male university lecturers, older than the students, from different cultural backgrounds, two white British, one black

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Caribbean-British and in relative positions of power, our positionality (Holmes, 2020) may have affected, in some way, the students' engagement with the research process. To mitigate this, we adopted a reflexive approach throughout. Our experience as researchers, working to ethical guidelines and as professional academics, with experience in designing and conducting qualitative research contributed to the trustworthiness and reliability of the research. No student was coerced to participate, and we ensured that we would not be involved in any future teaching or assessment of any of the students involved.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

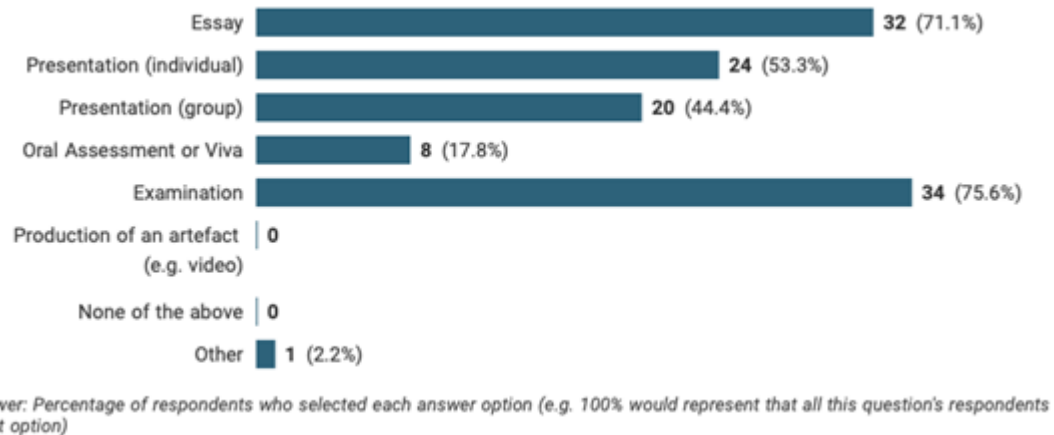
Data was analysed using the inbuilt analysis tools in the JISC Survey tool to determine percentages of respondents to the questions. Basic inductive text analysis was undertaken to identify key responses from the additional text responses, looking for key words pertaining to student experiences. Inductive text analysis is a qualitative research method that involves analysing text data to derive concepts, themes, or models, allowing research findings to emerge from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2012; Hayfield, Braun and Clarke, 2017; Kyngäs, 2020).

### **Summary of results and analysis of the data**

#### ***Students' previous experiences of assessment in HE***

We asked the question: "Which of the following ways have you been previously assessed in the past (in your pre-Hull university)?"

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**Figure 1:** Students' previous experiences of assessment in HE.

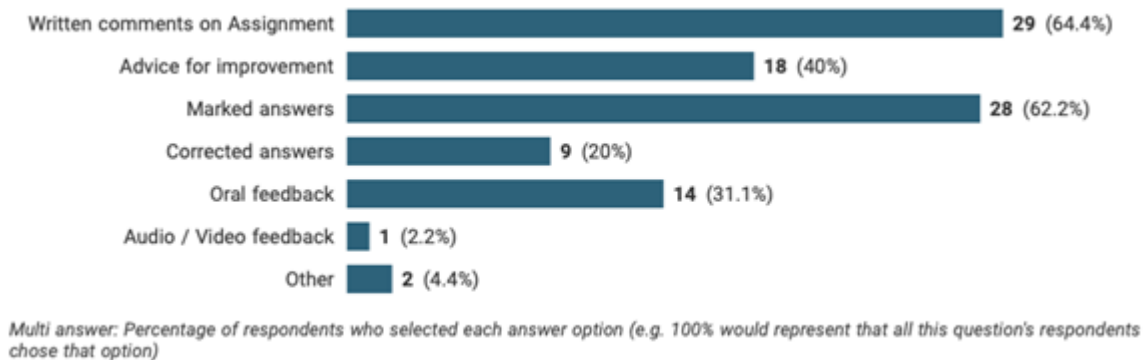
As figure 1 shows, a significant majority of respondents had previous experience of being assessed by an essay, whilst about half by presentation, and a significant minority by oral assessment. What is clear is that a large percentage (75.6%) had experience of assessment by formal examinations, which are now less common in Social Studies/Humanities HE teaching in the UK. This did cause some issues for students as the study and revision process of preparing for an examination are quite different to the assessment literacy skills (Smith et al., 2011) required for assignment writing. The most common form of assessment in African universities is an examination (Akolokwu, 2017).

### ***Student experiences of feedback***

We asked the question: "In which of the following ways have you received feedback [formative during the assessment process, or summative at the end of the assessment process] in your past [pre-Hull] university?".

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**Figure 2:** Ways students received feedback.

As figure 2 shows, it is significant from this that only 40% indicated they had received advice for improvement prior to studying in the UK. During previous in-class conversations when explaining the formative assessment process with students, we found that many articulated that they had “never” previously received any feedback when assessed by examination, they had only received a grade. This also mirrors the fact that a significant majority (75%) reported their previous method of assessment being examination and is further supported by the quotation below that point to the prominence of examinations in the international students’ previous experience of HE. For example, one student stated “Prior to studying in the UK, I received] No formative or summative feedback. I only sat for my assessments (examinations) and saw the results later on without any feedback” (Survey participant).

It is interesting that 31% indicated they had previously received oral feedback and a tiny group 2%, video feedback. We did not, however, specifically ask if oral feedback was summative or formative, but feel reasonably confident from our discussions with students that it referred to summative oral feedback.

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When asked about previous formative feedback experiences, 27 (60%) responded, adding further comments, however, the majority of responses were short (fewer than five words). The most common were variants around ‘written’ a few comments about informal verbal feedback. This was similar to the responses when asked about summative feedback, with the most common response being ‘written,’ there were also comments about marks and grades.

### ***Student experience of rubrics***

We asked students the question: “Have you any experience of receiving either summative or formative feedback through a rubric [pre–Hull university]?”. As the intervention's focus was using rubrics, we asked about their experiences of receiving feedback via one. There was a 100% response rate.



**Figure 3:** Students’ experience of getting feedback using a rubric.

Figure 3 shows a that almost half of respondents having had experience of receiving feedback through a rubric, though we do not know how the respondents specifically determined what a rubric was, although this was defined in the survey question.

### ***Student use of the formative rubric***

We asked students when, i.e., at what stage, they used the assessment rubric we provided them with during the assessment process; did they look at it prior to commencing their assignment or after starting it? 85% responded.

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**Figure 4:** Student use of the formative rubric prior to the assignment.

We can see from figure 4 that a significant majority of respondents looked at the assessment rubric before commencing the assignment.

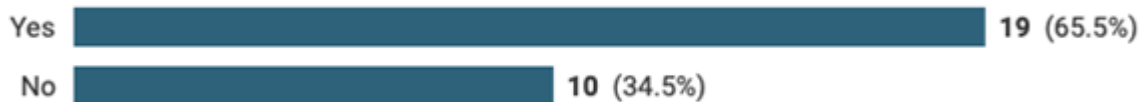
- After starting the assignment (28 [62%] responded).



**Figure 5:** Student use of the formative rubric after starting the assignment.

Figure 5 shows that a significant majority of respondents consulted the rubric after starting to write their assignment.

- Looking at the rubric during the assignment (29 [65%] responded).

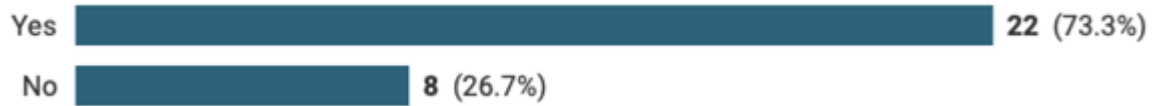


**Figure 6:** Student use of the formative rubric during the assignment.

Figure 6 shows that when compared to the others (before looking at the assignment and after starting), slightly fewer consulted the rubric during their writing of the assignment.

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We asked students; “Did you look at the rubric prior to submitting your assignment?”, and to also indicate if they did not look at the rubric.



**Figure 7:** Students looking at the formative rubric prior to submission.

As figure 7 indicates, 73.3% of respondents looked at the rubric before submitting the assignment.



**Figure 8:** Percentage of Students who did not look at the formative rubric.

Figure 8 confirms shows that a small minority of 15% did not look at the rubric, but the majority did.

Overall, we can see that the majority of respondents used the formative-specific rubric to support and guide their writing at significant points during their assignment writing process. This was without us providing any specific guidance on rubric usage, other than a recommendation during taught sessions to use it. The extended answers gave a range of answers about rubric usefulness from which some potentially useful information emerged yet was insufficient for us to identify any clear themes.

### ***Usefulness of the formative rubric in helping students improve for the summative assignment***

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We asked students the question: "How useful/helpful do you feel that formative rubric was in explaining to you / helping you to understand what you needed to do to improve for your summative assignment?".

36 (80%) responded with open text comments. Overall, these were positive about the usefulness of the rubric for improving future work. Around half the responses were positive but 'low key,' such as: "Somewhat, the expectations varied from lecturer to lecturer," and "It gives guidelines to improving on my assignment," "It was quite helpful." Other comments were much more positive, "It was really useful. I tried to pay attention to the different areas pointed out in the rubric.," "It was so useful in a great way" and "It helped me in arranging and adjusting and writing well." There was only one negative comment, "It was confusing. To(o) much and not direct. Different from what was always said at seminars" (Survey participants). The comment about expectations varying from lecturer to lecturer is somewhat surprising, identifying that, despite our intentions to help standardize inter-marker feedback, some students still perceived there to be differences, which is perhaps, not unexpected, given the body of existing literature about perceptions of fairness in assessment (e.g., Flores et al., 2014).

***Student disappointment about lack of a grade for formative work***

Although very satisfied with the feedback in terms of it helping them to reflect on and improve future work prior to submitting their summative assignment, we found a small number of students who, during tutorials, expressed concern about not receiving a grade for their formative work. They wanted, and expected, to receive a percentage grade/mark for the formatively assessed work and were disappointed to not

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receive one. Though they understood that the formative assessment's purpose was to provide a low-stakes assessment from which they received developmental feedback, they could not understand why they did not also receive a grade, even though it had been explained in-class that the formative work was ungraded. In their previous (i.e. pre-UK) university experience, all work they produced had been graded; they had relatively little experience of formative feedback. In 1-2-1 tutorials students sometimes expressed feelings of dismay and disappointment that they had 'failed' the formative assessment because the feedback indicated areas they needed to improve on if they wanted to pass the summative assessment, even though at the same time they recognized that they could not fail, because it was formative and ungraded. More than one student specifically articulated during tutorials that, whilst they understood the formative assignment was ungraded, their (correct) interpretation was that it indicated that they would have failed the assignment had it been a summative one. Although it was very clearly explained that they had not failed, because a formative assignment could not be failed, and though they acknowledged that they recognized and knew this, they were still disappointed. What these students experienced would seem to be a form of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962). This suggests that we need to more clearly and explicitly explain to international students that formatively assessed work is ungraded and the work cannot be 'failed.'

### **Student use of the summative rubric**

We asked students whether they looked at the summative rubric along with their summative assessment feedback and grade, or whether they did not look at the rubric. 43 (96%) responded,

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**Figure 9:** Percentage of respondents who looked at the summative rubric along with written feedback.

Figure 9 shows that the vast majority of respondents (95.3%) looked at the rubric and written feedback. Whilst a relatively small number, 4.7%, did not.

- I did not look at the rubric (14 [31%] responded overall).



**Figure 10:** Percentage of respondents who did not look at the summative rubric.

As figure 10 shows, it is interesting that the response rate for the earlier question about the formative rubric is different. The important thing to note here is that students did use the rubric as well as the written feedback.

***Usefulness of the rubric to understand grading achievement***

We asked students the question: “How useful/helpful do you feel that the feedback you received within rubric was in explaining to you / helping you to understand where you did well and where you did less well?”.

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34 (76%) responded with open text comments. The most common term used was help\* (helps, helpful, helped) which appears 17 times in the comments, mostly positive, though one negative. Useful also appears 7 times, always positive. Overall, the comments were very positive: “It was very useful. I understood why I got what I got, as opposed to what happened with the other course”, “It highlighted my strong and weak points that will make my next assignment attain earn higher points” and “The feedback I received within the rubric was a kind of measure of the level of my critical thinking ability.” Although there were some negative comments, “My feedback was poor in detail” and “It is not really explaining in detail (sic) feedback I can understand” (Survey participants).

### ***Usefulness of summative rubric to improve future work***

We asked students the question: “How useful/helpful do you feel that feedback you received within rubric was in helping you to understand which areas of your work/which skills you needed to focus on improving?”.

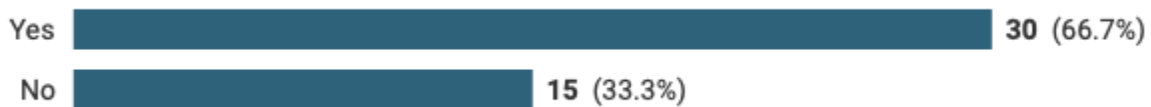
32 (71%) responded with open text comments. The phrase ‘helpful’ or variations of it (10 occurrences) and useful (11 occurrences) were used. The tone of responses was generally very positive, indicating that the feedback provided a good indication of how to improve future work: “definitely, the feedback will help me prepare for the next assignments,” “The focused feedback saved me a lot of time” (Survey Participants). Though there were some more tentative comments about its usefulness, “I could understand where I lost the mark. However, feedback is quite challenging to understand.” The few negative comments were terser, “No” and “Not useful” (Survey Participants), without explaining why.

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***Clarity of the rubric in informing understanding of the grade***

We asked students: "Was it clear from the rubrics how your overall grade had been arrived at?"



**Figure 10:** Percentage of respondents responding to the question about clarity of the rubric.

As figure 10 shows, the majority of respondents (66.7%) were clear about the clarity of the rubric, but a significant minority (33.3%) were not, potentially indicating that pre-development work, advice, and guidance to better facilitate students' understanding when using rubrics is important and the need to gather feedback from students about what specifically needed to be clearer. We acknowledge that we did not involve students when we designed the rubric. For a third of respondents to not find the summative rubric to have clarity in informing them about their grade attainment is a concern, and further research is required to ascertain whether this lack of clarity was due to the terminology used in it, the design/layout of the rubric itself, or student's lack of understanding, or a combination of these.

***Clarity of rubric criteria***

We asked students the question: "Were the criteria used clear?" i.e. were the words used within the rubrics clear and understandable?

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**Figure 11:** Percentage of respondents responding to the clarity and understanding of the rubric.

As figure 11 shows, a significant majority of respondents (82.2%) indicated that the rubric criteria used were clear, but a small minority (17.8%) were not, again potentially indicating that pre-development work when using rubrics is important. There is a mismatch between the answer to this question and the previous one, in that 82% felt that rubric had clarity in respect of its criteria, yet only (66.7%) felt that it had clarity in respect of informing their grade.

### ***Indication of requirement for improvement***

We asked the students “Did you understand what was required to achieve well/highly?”. Note we did not define what well/highly was – the terms will have been subjectively interpreted by each student.



**Figure 12:** Percentage of respondents responding to requirement for improvement.

We are unsure why the JISC inbuilt calculation system indicated that there was a 102.2% response as shown in figure 12. We attribute this to one student ticking more than one box. Having said this, the data is interesting in that the majority of respondents felt that the summative rubric only provided developmental feedback ‘to some degree’ or not at all. Perhaps this indicates a need to include more

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developmental feedback within summative assessment rubrics, or it may be the case that students had compared it to the formative specific rubric and thus expected as much developmental feedback in the summative rubric. Further research is required here.

Overall, the results here show the importance of not just the provision of the rubric but a need for clear explanation, guidance, exploration and possible modelling or exemplification on rubric usage. This is an area where further research is required to inform practice.

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Conclusions**

The objective of this research was to evaluate the use of a 'formative-specific' assessment rubric tailored for formative assessment, and a distinct rubric designed for summative assessment. This study emerged from teaching international postgraduate taught students with a background in more 'traditional' (essay and examination) assessment methods. The students were not used to a more discursive approach to assessment. To support these learners, we developed a 'formative-specific' rubric and 'fixed' formal formative assessment process to broaden and deepen international students' understandings of UK postgraduate assessment in a taught postgraduate Education Studies programme.

From the opportunity sample of students surveyed, the data collected through this method and the use of anecdotal conversations with them, we are confident that the aims of the intervention were achieved. The data clearly indicates that the explicit

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nature of the rubric with clear indications of gradings and instructions for achievement aided the students in moving from the formative to the summative assessment and understanding what was needed to develop their thinking and understanding within the parameters of the assessment.

We argue that a core purpose of assessment is to enable students to progress in their understanding as well as to achieve good grades (Boud and Molloy, 2013). The rubric, and the conversations that this stimulated showed that there was clarity in understanding. Students understood the level and quality of work expected of postgraduate students studying for a qualification within the UK HE system and the quality and standard of academic work required to be successful in the assessment, yet not always about how their actual grade had been arrived at. The data also shows that the students found the summative rubric useful in progressing to their next assignments in their master's level degree programme.

Bearing in mind the need to mitigate the negative affect(s) of students' emotional responses to summative assessment feedback (Holmes, 2023) and help counter the hidden curriculum within assessment processes, making assessment more inclusive, we believe that our study has shown that a 'formative specific' rubric used alongside a 'formal' formative assessment can help develop international students' understandings of the requirements for success within a UK postgraduate programme of study. This contributes to developing students' assessment literacy (Holmes, 2024).

Whilst we recognize the limitations of this small-scale study, we believe that this intervention offers a model for others to use and develop when working not only with international master's level students but within wider assessment practice, to help develop students' expectations of the requirements of university-level work; as such it may be particularly suitable for use with first-year undergraduate students.

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**Limitations of the research**

The study relied on a survey using questions and informal discussion, devised by three academics, and a sample of students from one UK university studying one specific Education module. Most participants were black African students. The views of UK students made a small (6.5%) contribution and those studying other disciplines are not represented. We acknowledge that their views may be different and that their absence may be a limiting factor. Data was analysed by the team, and we may have biases that we are unaware of, though through using collective and individual critical reflection to surface and address our biases we were able to reduce and mitigate individual subjectivity. The results may not be representative of other UK HE programmes, nor generalizable to them.

**Recommendations for practice**

We suggest that a formalized mid-module formative assessment process, utilizing a 'formative-specific' rubric designed specifically to provide developmental feedback and clarify expectations could be introduced in many university programmes/modules. This approach will contribute to facilitating the development of students' assessment literacy and improve overall understanding, particularly in respect of the level, standard, and quality of work expected and required, and should therefore improve student attainment.

Whilst this study was undertaken with international postgraduate students, we suggest that formative-specific rubrics would work effectively with UK undergraduate students, particularly first-years. Given the important place of assessment within the

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curriculum, and the need to design assessment processes to enable students to achieve their full potential, interventions like this may positively affect student achievement and outcomes.

## **Disclosure**

Generative AI and/or AI-assisted technologies have not been used at any stage of the manuscript's writing and preparation.

## **Ethics**

The research was approved through the University's approval processes.

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