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Rubrics in higher education: an exploration of undergraduate students' understanding and perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Rubrics are an assessment framework commonly employed in higher education settings; however, students can engage with and perceive them to be used in a variety of ways and with varying degrees of success. The aim of this research project was to explore these perceptions, to better understand how rubrics might be used to support students more effectively to successful academic outcomes. Fourteen interviews were conducted over a period of fourteen months, and four themes were identified: rubric introductions; rubric content (including language and format); student rubric use and the role of rubrics in how work is assessed. Findings were considered from thematic perspectives of the student participants. Conclusions drawn focus on the quality of classroom discussion when rubrics are introduced, the practical application of rubrics as a writing or planning tool, the need for detail and clarity in language use and explicit links between feedback and rubrics. Overall, effective engagement with rubrics appears to reduce student anxiety.

KEYWORDS


Rubrics; higher education; assessment

Introduction

As the use of rubrics in a higher educational context (and the research into them) increases, a uniform definition and understanding of the term has become more difficult to establish (Dawson 2017). Their design and structure can vary widely, as can their intended function (Prins, De Kleijn, and Van Tartwijk 2017) and the perception of their use by those engaging with them (Chan and Ho 2019). The term rubric has consequently been described by some as 'confusing' (Hafner and Hafner 2003, 169) and unclear (Dawson 2017). For the purposes of this research, the following definition of rubrics by Panadero and Romero will be used:

Rubrics are documents that articulate the expectations of an assignment by listing the criteria for what is particularly important and by describing levels of quality on a scale from excellent to poor. Rubrics have three features: assessment criteria, a grading strategy and standards/quality definitions. (2014, 135)

Rubrics are commonly used by educators and students as a part of the assessment process (Chan and Ho 2019) but the literature around their usage diverges in its discussion of how beneficial they are for students. This paper aims to explore students' perspectives on rubrics, regarding how they engage with them, how useful they are and their perceptions on how they are engaged with by their lecturers. It begins with a review of key literature, to establish and discuss existing

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research and guidance on the use of rubrics in higher education, with a particular focus on those which involve student perspectives. The methods used by the researchers are then outlined, including what data was collected and how it was analysed. Subsequently, this research's findings will be presented with a series of implications for rubric usage.

Benefits of rubric use

Literature on the positive impact of rubrics often notes the role that they play in the standardisation of evaluation by markers. Chan and Ho (2019) identify this as a key theme within their research on student nurses' and their teachers' perspectives on good practice; participants believed that rubrics helped to ensure a consistent approach when multiple markers were responsible for the same assessment. Similarly, in their review of rubric usage in higher education, Reddy and Andrade (2010) discuss the importance of rubrics as a tool to support inter-rater reliability between markers but also between students and markers. Other studies have also purported the increased consistency of scoring as a result of employing a rubric (Jonsson and Svingby 2007; Wolf and Stevens 2007). It is important to note that this increase in standardisation and reliability is dependent on a variety of factors such as how the rubric is created, introduced and engaged with (Jonsson and Svingby 2007) and that these increases in inter-rater reliability have not often been found to be statistically significant when compared to not using a rubric (Gyamfi, Hanna, and Khosravi 2022).

Another widely recognised benefit of rubrics is their potential to provide clarity for students on the expectations of the assessment (Jonsson and Svingby 2007; Kilgour et al. 2020; Pang et al. 2022), thus increasing students' understanding of the task (Bolton 2006; Wolf and Stevens 2007). This clear and systematic communication of expectations has also been seen to have an impact on increasing student confidence (Gyamfi, Hanna, and Khosravi 2022) and lessening anxiety around assessments (Panadero and Romero 2014; Reynolds-Keefer 2019). Research into student perspectives on rubrics has generally found that students feel positively towards them when used as part of the assessment process (Prins, De Kleijn, and Van Tartwijk 2017; Andrade and Du 2005), although of course this is dependent on a large variety of other factors, such as how well the rubrics were explained and exemplified by teachers and whether they were used as part of the feedback process. There is research which suggests that students do not always value their use (Andrade and Du 2005) and in some cases, on reflection, find them confusing (Kilgour et al. 2020). The reasons behind these more negative perceptions will be explored further in this review, as this research also focuses on student perspectives on rubrics and so the existing literature in this area is particularly pertinent.

Increased student performance has been identified by some as a positive effect of the use of rubrics within assessment practices (Hafner and Hafner 2003; Panadero and Jonsson 2013; Panadero and Romero 2014; Tshering and Phu-Ampai 2018; Ragupathi and Lee 2020); although the mere existence of the rubric cannot be purported to have a causative relationship with academic improvement or performance, as there are many other factors involved such as whether the rubric is used as part of formative assessment practice (Jonsson and Svingby 2007; Ragupathi and Lee 2020) or is used as a key resource throughout a teaching period (Tshering and Phu-Ampai 2018). This involves the students engaging more deeply with the rubric by, for example, providing training in how to use them and/or being involved in their development; these implications will be explored further. Green and Bowser (2006) question the impact of rubric on the quality of student work altogether, having found no improvement in students' grades after being provided with a rubric. The authors, however, do acknowledge that the participants were not familiar with rubrics or shown how to engage with them, which could then be seen to support the previous points.

Limitations of rubric use

Bolton's (2006) research into student perspectives on rubrics found that some felt their use had the potential to stifle creativity through their explicitness; a concern also expressed by Wolf and Stevens (2007) in their evaluation of rubrics. This sentiment is reflected in Andrade and Du's (2005) study which highlights that, although students felt positively toward the use of rubrics, some of their responses suggested that rubrics were more about understanding what teachers wanted and how they thought, as opposed to encouraging them to explore their own ideas or ensure quality. Reynolds-Keefer (2019, 6) also warns that some students view rubrics as a 'laundry list' and consequently they may overlook key ideas, concepts and goals within the learning, due to this surface-level interaction. Of course, this does depend on the specific requirements set down within the rubric, and how they are presented.

Chan and Ho (2019) note that some students expressed negative responses to rubrics when they contained 'vague descriptions' (533) which depend on subjective standards; for example, it is difficult to distinguish how 'good quality' in a certain area differs from 'excellent quality'. This concern over ambiguous language/descriptors within rubrics is something that came through quite strongly in our own research.

Much of the literature that supports the use of rubrics is clear that they must be used as more than a teacher's guide for marking summative assessment. They need to be used collaboratively by staff and students as part of the teaching and learning process (Wolf and Stevens 2007); without opportunities for explanation, exploration and discussion, the rubric will have very limited practical use (Prins, De Kleijn, and Van Tartwijk 2017). If rubrics do not have a role in the formative assessment process, their learning impact is questionable (Jonsson and Svingby 2007; Panadero and Romero 2014). This highlights the potential for huge variability in the usefulness of a rubric as it is so dependent on the way it is introduced and implemented by the academics responsible.

Implications and recommendations for rubric usage

There is a general consensus in the literature around rubrics that they have the potential to advance student learning, support instruction and strengthen assessment practices (Wolf and Stevens 2007) and are valued by staff and students alike (Bolton 2006); however, this is only when they are used as more than just a teacher tick-list for marking. Many researchers have suggested that rubrics are most impactful when used as a tool to support students' self and peer assessment of their learning in a formative context (Hafner and Hafner 2003; Jonsson and Svingby 2007; Reddy and Andrade 2010; Prins, De Kleijn, and Van Tartwijk 2017; Tshering and Phu-Ampai 2018; Pang et al. 2022), and that students need to be actively taught and supported to do this well by staff with time dedicated to engaging with rubrics in this way (Panadero and Jonsson 2013; Panadero and Romero 2014).

One suggestion for ensuring rubrics are engaged with more comprehensively by students is for them to be part of the creation of the rubrics, through co-construction with staff (Panadero and Romero 2014), which can support their understanding and ownership of their learning and of the rubric, but also has implications for the amount of time needed to engage sufficiently in this process (Kilgour et al. 2020). Bolton (2006) suggests that dedicating more time to the creation of rubrics in general would be more than justified by their consequential impact on student performance.

Another key implication for educators using rubrics is the need for the language used to be clear and detailed, in order for students to be able to accurately make sense of the expectations of them at each level (Jonsson and Svingby 2007; Chan and Ho 2019), but it is important that, while specific and demonstrative of what is valued, the rubrics do not act as a 'straitjacket' which diminishes student creativity (Wolf and Stevens 2007, 13).

The above implications suggest that staff involved in rubric creation and use need to be sufficiently trained to ensure that they are using rubrics in a way that will support student confidence, assessment and outcomes. The extent to which this coheres with the data generated in this study will be explored later.

Methods

This qualitative, empirical study was conducted in an English post-1992 university. Institutional data from the academic year 2020/21 showed that the institution's student cohort was diverse, drawn from over 150 countries, and made up of the following ethnicities: Asian 34%, White 26%, Black 24%, Mixed 5%, Other 4%, Not known 6%; with 57% female and 43% male; 57% of the university's 40,000 students were the first in their family to attend university. The research team were all employed as lecturers by the institution in which the research took place.

The research was conducted between August 2022 and October 2023 with undergraduate level 6 (i.e. third and final year) students following the conclusion of their taught modules for that academic year. Purposive sampling (Johnson and Christensen 2012) was employed to actively seek participants who had studied multiple modules where grading rubrics were used and shared by the module leaders. This was important because, in order to provide the contextualised descriptions and informed insights that ideally emerge from purposive sampling (Coe 2012), participants needed to have a breadth of experiences to draw on regarding rubrics. Students from four undergraduate courses were invited to take part: Early Childhood Studies, Education Studies, Primary Education with Qualified Teacher Status, and Special Education. Initially, basic information about the research was provided online, via Microsoft Teams and Moodle, and then a more detailed information and consent form was sent to those who expressed an interest. Ultimately, 14 students took part and each was interviewed individually by a member of the research team, with interviews lasting between 20 and 40 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, with pre-determined questions and themes identified to ensure that a keen focus on the key issues was maintained (Gray 2018). These were: whether lecturers used rubrics during the students' modules; how the rubrics were introduced to the students; students' experiences and methods of working with rubrics; students' understandings of the purpose of rubrics, for them and for their lecturers; similarities and differences between rubrics for different modules; students' perceptions of what makes rubrics effective or ineffective; and students' involvement in editing and creating rubrics. The semi-structured nature of the interviews enabled the researchers to alter the order of the questions, prompt or probe to follow up interesting responses, and omit questions if previous answers had already addressed the essence of a later question.

The interviews were transcribed by the researchers and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was employed. Following engagement with previous research in this field, some themes were identified deductively: students' experience of being introduced to rubrics; students' understanding and experience of language used in rubrics; students' engagement with rubrics during their modules; and students' perceptions of the role of rubrics in how their work is assessed. During the analysis the second theme was amended inductively to include the format and presentation of the rubrics, not just the language used. This flexibility was important because the research was exploratory in nature, with no intention to try to prove existing hypotheses (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). The analysis was both semantic and latent, as it was felt that the participants, in maintaining their professionalism, may not have been willing to be explicit in their critique of the practices that they experienced, so the ability to infer meaning and identify subtext was important (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the university's ethics committee. The principle ethical considerations were around recruitment and consent, participant wellbeing and potential conflicts of interest for lecturers who may be lecturers and researchers with the same students.

As noted, participants were provided with a detailed information and consent form outlining the aims of the research, and what was required of them as participants. They were also offered the right of withdrawal before the interview, even after providing consent, and could withdraw their data up to the point of data analysis. While discussion of rubrics was not considered to be psychologically harmful, the research team were mindful that participants could become disquieted or anxious discussing previous experiences which they found difficult, or reflecting on modules in which they had been unsuccessful. Therefore, the researchers were vigilant during interviews, mindful of any signs of discomfort, and ready to omit or re-order questions or end the interview early if necessary.

The research team was also keen to avoid any potential conflicts of interests around holding the roles of researcher and lecturer to any of the participants. Therefore, all interviews took place after it had been confirmed that the participants had passed all their modules for the academic year. It would not have been appropriate for researchers to request participation in the research if they were still in the process of marking their work.

It should be acknowledged that the students who volunteered to participate are likely to be among the most interested and engaged in their studies and how they were assessed, or those with strong views about rubrics or module assessment more generally. Therefore, it is unclear how other students, who were less invested in these topics, experienced rubrics and how they were employed during their studies.

Results and discussion

Analysis of data led to an identification of four recurrent themes: students' experience of being introduced to rubrics; students' understanding and experience of language used, format and presentation of the rubrics; students' engagement with rubrics during their modules; and students' perceptions of the role of rubrics in how their work is assessed.

Theme one: students' experience of being introduced to rubrics

Within student experiences of rubric introduction, three contrasting experiences were apparent, whereby: the rubric was explored and discussed in one or more sessions in relation to the assignment; the rubric was introduced in relation to the assignment guidance in an opening session; the rubric was posted to Moodle alongside assignment guidance. It should be noted that several interviewees expressed inconsistency around rubric introductions and shared responses relating to more than one of these experiences, dependent on the specific module and lecturer to which they were referring.

All students indicated opportunities for discussion of the rubric in an early academic-led session, in at least one of their modules. These discussions included explanations by module leaders, opportunities for questions, opportunities for students to apply the rubric to essay samples, engagement with module forums, and direction of students to targeted grade boundaries, with the most cited experience being early opportunities to question lecturers, with only two students indicating an absence of this across their degree. Much as Panadero and Romero (2014) identify, the reflections around opportunities for engagement with rubrics were positive, with students citing this as a key tool to student success. However, four respondents noted that in-class discussions could be less than satisfactory and might even contribute to feelings of bewilderment for the students, echoing the findings of Kilgour et al. (2020); One saw this rooted in time constraints, while Nicola (pseudonym) noted 'there was always confusion around the assessment and the rubrics'; two others indicated that only through follow-up in student-initiated peer-support groups was successful engagement with, and clarity around the rubric, ultimately achieved.

Four students identified that the rubric was solely introduced as part of assignment guidance in an opening session; for three this experience was consistent across all modules of their degree. As such, they could not compare it to modules with a more forensic introduction. For Peter, it was an occasional experience and compared unfavourably to others which enabled student voice more actively. However, he noted that having the two together made him 'feel it all comes together'; benefitting the students as they were able to see explicitly the rationale underpinning the rubric.

When discussing experiences where rubrics were solely posted to Moodle, students noted varying levels of signposting and a need for proactivity on behalf of students to trace these. Given Panadero and Romero (2014) relate rubric use to lowered student anxiety around assessments, it follows that in these contexts, student reflections were, in the main, less positive. While two students were happy negotiating rubrics independently, two responses noted a need to collaborate with peers in order to deduce the meaning and one response suggested that the posting of a rubric, without enabling engagement with it, is a compliance as opposed to a learning exercise, a sentiment which concurs with the findings of Jonsson and Svingby (2007) whereby handing rubrics out is indicated as no guarantee of success. As well as discrepancies in *how* rubrics were explored, there was also inconsistency around *when*. While one response recalled a general introduction at Level 4 (i.e. first year), two identified Level 5 (i.e. second year) as the first opportunity for engagement, and one named Level 6.

For most respondents, the rubrics were not introduced nor explored in a similar way across all modules and all levels of study. Feedback thus focussed on the need for consistency around opportunities for discussion. As per Chan and Ho (2019) recommendation for student education around rubrics, students noted the need for earlier and more rigorous introduction to rubrics at Level 4 so that all students have a clear understanding of their value, with Paula articulating: 'if you don't know what something is – if it's going to benefit you or not – you won't use it'. Direct instruction on how to use the rubrics, especially as a tool for gaining higher grades, and exemplification of how different grade boundaries might be applied to different written outcomes, were also identified as useful approaches to in-session rubric analysis. Indeed, most interviewees articulated positive sentiments around how opportunities to explore the rubric, embedded within lectures and seminars, might impact student outcomes favourably.

Theme 2: students' understanding and experience of language used, format and presentation of the rubrics

When it came to discussions around language, points raised were rooted predominantly in a need for transparency. Recurrent ideas concerned the clarity of descriptors and the need for specific details within grade boundaries; there were also some commonalities detailing how rubric content between modules can overlap, the lack of academic freedom inherent in a rubric, as well as points exploring challenges rooted in the interpretation of rubrics due to formatting.

While Rachel saw the rubrics, in the main, to be 'clear and well defined', six respondents commented on the ambiguity of language guiding the progressions across grade boundaries on the rubrics. They explored the interpretation inherent in this ambiguity, thus confirming the bad practice of a 'subjective standard' cautioned by Chan and Ho (2019, 539). Danielle questioned the difference between adjectives such as 'in-depth' and 'excellent', while Brenda raised similar concerns around what might be expected from the descriptors 'more' or 'better'. Peter focussed on the subjectivity that this ambiguity affords, unpicking the phrase 'critical analysis' as one that might be particularly influenced by personal response. These students perceived small changes in language use as insufficient support when aiming for next level of degree classification. Conversely, one student was alone in affirming clarity within the progressive language use, seeing it as a positive indicator of how she could enhance her efforts in academic writing, while a second noted that, over time and with experience in undergraduate study, it became possible to

reach a more enhanced understanding of the subtle nuances in language use. Aligned with the sentiments of the student participants in Kilgour et al.'s (2020) study, one response maintained that student co-creation of rubrics might go some way to ensuring effective language use; however other interviewees were assertive in their rejection of co-creation, seeing rubric content situated exclusively within the academics' realm.

Points around ambiguity were mirrored by those respondents seeking specific detail. It was felt by seven students that more detail within each grade boundary would enable a greater level of transparency; they stipulated that the similarities between sections were too great. Three identified the progression from the 70s to 80s as being particularly hard to unpick due to repetition and, in Radha's experience, the addition of 'just one word different... 'active' marking out the highest grade. Given rubrics should articulate expectations so that criteria are effectively described at each level (Gyamfi, Hanna, and Khosravi 2022), the proportion of respondents raising these issues is concerning. Students identified supportive details they might expect; for Greta this was numerical components like 'two points' for one grade boundary and 'three or four' for the next. For one student, clear identification of key words should be a requirement while, for another, in a further nod to the recommendations of Chan and Ho (2019), a supportive addition might involve noting the specific marking allocation for each learning outcome (LO); for example, LO1 has a maximum of 30 marks and LO2 20, to the total of 100. Brad compared his experience with rubrics which did contain greater detail, with specific items noted within each boundary, to those which were compiled with repetitive phrases, attributing his successful high grade in a module to the specificity of the rubric which he had consulted when writing: 'one...was really broken down in detail and I followed that rigorously, I got a 92 for that so that just shows how useful that they can be'.

The lack of detail was, in four cases, explored in relation to application of a generic rubric across different modules. This overlap between different modules in rubric language was not perceived as useful; Brad cited these rubrics as 'basic', and one response articulated that bespoke rubrics aligned to specific modules and assignments were far more informative to the student. It seems that respondents wanted more consistency: a rubric, as Dawson (2017) explains, with a detailed explanation of what a given quality response looks like compared to those with generic quality words, or Reynolds-Keefer's 'laundry list' (2019, 6).

In contrast to these broad findings around the need for clarity in rubric language, two students (Radha and Nicola) articulated dislike around this level of detail at the expense of content enabling student autonomy, aligning with student responses around rubric content outlined by Gyamfi, Hanna, and Khosravi (2022). They perceived intricate rubric guidance to be a limiting factor on student engagement and, in line with the findings of Wolf and Stevens (2007), to shoe-horn the learner into a particular way of thinking. They saw the imposition of a set framework to create a rigidity around the learning process, alienating students from autonomy within their personal learning journeys, with Radha going so far as to label specific rubric detail 'pedantic'. It is worth noting that earlier in their interviews both Radha and Nicola expressed the need for rubric language to be supportive rather than subjective or lacking clarity. It might therefore be inferred that the generic application of a clearly articulated rubric across modules might be perceived positively, as it would reinstate opportunities for freedom which these responses sought while securing a clear brief at each grade boundary.

Lastly, six respondents reflected on the formatting and layout of the rubrics. There was a positive response around the consistent layout with progression from marks at 40 and below on the left, to those in the 80s on the right. A further positive was noted by two students where the order of the LOs mapped to the recommended format of any accompanying assignment guidance. However, one identified as an obstacle where abbreviations and labels were used either inconsistently between modules, or without explanation. There was also broad agreement around word-count, with Andrew stating 'there is just so much information' and Penny emphasising that 'having it on a page was hard... seeing it was hard', demonstrating layout as a barrier to full engagement.

Theme 3: students' engagement with rubrics during their modules

Analysis of responses saw four core approaches to student engagement with rubrics: a planning support in the early stages of an assignment, a summative checklist in review of a completed assignment, a guide referred to throughout the writing process and a target setting tool. These functions sit within, or alongside, those identified by Prins, De Kleijn, and Van Tartwijk (2017).

Seven respondents stipulated the rubric as a supportive planning tool, giving them confidence to undertake the required tasks. Andrew saw it as a 'blueprint', a set of instructions that he should adhere to, to get the assignment 'right', while another respondent similarly used it to structure and map out her approach effectively. For others, the initial support offered by the rubric was more emotional, with Rachel exploring concepts around self-confidence when engaging with the rubric at the planning stage, repeating 'it really does help' when reflecting on moments of stress and anxiety amid early uncertainty around a piece of writing. These students illustrate the findings articulated by Brookhart and Chen (2015), whereby self-regulation is maintained by rubric use and performance is thereby increased. In contrast, three respondents used the rubric to review their work at the end of the writing stage (indeed, two engaged both at the start of their assignment to plan, and again at the end). For these students, it became a kind of checklist whereby they could cross-reference what they had included in their assignments against the requirements outlined.

In contrast, four respondents worked more closely alongside the rubric throughout the assignment writing process, with Brad referring to it as his 'Bible', such was his commitment to its support and guidance. One other likewise noted that it guided her as she wrote, and one copied key words from the rubric into her draft as an ongoing reminder of what she was aiming toward; she sought to embed the language from the rubric within her own writing. In a similar manner, one respondent would delete superfluous language from the rubric to focus her efforts on key elements, systematically cross-referencing from the lowest grade boundary to the highest in an effort to rigorously adhere to provided guidance.

All of these eleven students who engaged with the rubrics in some way to write their assignments were positive about its use in this way, and particularly the final four who adhered so closely, seemingly reflecting findings cited by Gyamfi, Hanna, and Khosravi (2022) where rubric use decreased anxiety and enabled students to feel positive about the work they were creating. In contrast, two did not consistently use the rubric. For Brenda, her distancing from the rubric guidance was rooted in her established confidence and success as a writer. She did not give it more than a 'quick look'. However, another reported that she did not know how she should use the rubric and was never clear how to start. This refers back to the need for education around rubrics if they are to be implemented as effective tools (Chan and Ho 2019).

Four students additionally noted that the rubric was used as a personal target setting tool. Ashlie used the rubric to edit in extra details which would 'push [her] marks to a higher grade' and Danielle saw it as a tool to 'hit the higher marks' as did one other. One response noted facilitation in this approach, indicating he had been motivated by his lecturers to use the rubric to aim for a target grade. These students were able to use the rubrics to gain 'a clearer idea of what content should be included and what a higher quality of work looks like' (Chan and Ho 2019, 538). In contrast, one student explained how she attempted to write around the higher-grade outcomes but was not successful in securing the grade she had aspired to so did not repeat this approach, demonstrating the frustrations implicit when students are not educated effectively in rubric use (Chan and Ho 2019).

Theme 4: students' perceptions of the role of rubrics in how their work is assessed

In terms of students' perceptions of the role of rubrics when their work is assessed, they were overwhelmingly clear that the intended use of a rubric was to seek objectivity when allocating a

mark to their assignments (Brookhart 2018). However, over half of those who expressed this did not demonstrate conviction around whether it was indeed what happened, and a small minority (two respondents) did not demonstrate understanding around a rubric's use as a grading tool.

The understanding that rubrics aided lecturers in awarding marks to assignments was convincingly articulated by twelve out of fourteen interviewees. They identified that the rubric enables consistency by providing shared criteria to which the marker or markers will refer during the marking process. Penny expressed that they provide a 'a bare bones... for the lecturers as to what they're looking for to hit certain grade points' and thus it is used as a method by which evaluation is standardised, articulating Dawson's 'holistic scoring strategies' (2017, 351). Evidence for this objective or intentional rubric application (Chan and Ho 2019) lay for some in their ability to identify similar language structures across both rubric and feedback: '[one lecturer] used exactly the same language, so you know, I knew that she was using that rubric', Brad confirmed. A further response highlighted that language from rubric grade boundaries would often be mirrored back in his feedback, and one other noted that when this was the case, it provided a certainty that the rubric had been applied with some rigor. These students affirm what Chan and Ho (2019, 538) term 'transparency of evaluation', an indicator of good practice. Brad explained how the rubric created a congruence between student and lecturer as shared tool: 'that is both of our guides... this is how you're going to be marking and so this is how I'm going to be writing'. This echoes the findings of Johnson and Svingby (2007, 131), who state that 'the rubric tells both instructor and student what is considered important and what to look for when assessing'. One respondent explained that the rubric is thus dual-purpose and is perhaps a means by which the student can hold the marker to account for a grade received.

While Gyamfi, Hanna, and Khosravi (2022) indicate that use of rubrics increased students' confidence in assessing, only three respondents articulated this confidence. Eight others expressed degrees of doubt around whether objective application was consistently - or ever - the case: 'some do say that they use it but whether they do or not I don't know' [Brad]. Doubts ranged from a niggling suspicion articulated by five students to a more considered rejection expressed by a further three. Feelings of doubt were most often prompted by a lack of congruence between language of the rubric and language of feedback which most students interpreted to suggest inconsistent application.

Of those confident that rubrics were not used impartially during marking, one saw a pronounced disconnect between rubric and feedback language, while another echoed theme one in her points around language; reflecting that much as students will struggle to comprehend vagaries, lecturers will likewise struggle, again resulting in the 'subjective standard' (Chan and Ho 2019, 539) and inconsistent application of a grade boundary. One response expressed similar ideas, drawing out that lecturers' interpretations align with their values, and that if these are not shared with the student whose work is under scrutiny, there is a disconnect between impartial application of the rubric; as such these responses negated the asserted objectivity of the rubric framework.

Two respondents were unclear around the rubric's role in assessment. One queried the rationale for rubric boundaries below 50, revealing his perception of the rubric as purely a planning device rather than a grading tool used equally by his lecturers. Another was also unclear on how a rubric might be used by markers for assessment. Once more, effective education around rubric use (Chan and Ho 2019) might have resolved these misconceptions.

Conclusion and implications

This study has demonstrated that undergraduate students use their modules' rubrics to support their studies and their developing assessments, placing great stock on how they are set out, the language they use and their links to feedback. Indeed, this research has highlighted several key implications for practice:

- Students' perceptions of the impact of the rubric on their assessments appeared to be linked to the quality of its initial introduction, and the ongoing classroom discussion. Where these experiences were positive and detailed, the students felt more confident in their use of the document going forward. Where this was brief, or appeared to be tokenistic, students did not view the rubrics positively. Furthermore, there was value in lecturers taking time within taught sessions to show how to use the rubrics most effectively.
- While it is clear that rubrics are a key element of formative assessment, students benefit from applying the document to learning activities that contribute towards success in final assignments, such as formative assessment tasks. This can provide practice for students of how to use the rubric to compare with, inform and grade their developing work.
- Several students identified that language within the rubrics was often subjective, finding it hard to distinguish between, for example, work that was 'very good' and work that was just 'good'. Lecturers need to consider how students are likely to experience the rubric, and whether more exemplifying terms might help students understand what the expectations are at the different grade boundaries. However, there is a balance to be struck here, as students may find it hard to keep within task word counts, if the higher grade boundaries seemingly just add more and more things to be included. There may be a spectrum between these two approaches, and lecturers should consider how rubrics can help students to understand how to achieve higher grades by doing a task better, and not just by doing more.
- Consistency of approach was prized by students, and they spoke positively about situations where the way that rubrics were set out was shared among modules in the same level. In many cases, it should also be possible to apply language consistently so that the same terminology or expectations appear in the same grade boundary. For example, at what grade is critical analysis an expectation? At what grade is error-free referencing an expectation? This sort of consistency would help to show to students that rubrics are not just designed with the individual lecturer's preferences in mind, which might differ from module to module, as this was something that some students had inferred.
- Students recognised and appreciated the links between the rubrics and their assignment feedback. Where language was shared between the two, this helped to validate students' use of the rubric when developing their work, and helped to demonstrate that lecturers were clearly using the rubric to inform their marking.
- Students' rubric use supported their confidence, promoted self-efficacy and reduced anxiety. While this should not be the main reason for creating and sharing rubrics with students, the impact of this should not be underestimated, and this highlights further the need for lecturers to create meaningful, useful documents. If students find them to be unhelpful, e.g., because of subjective language, or inconsistencies in layout, then this is likely to reduce the impact that they have both academically and emotionally.

In summary, there are clear messages here around language, consistency and embedding of rubrics within lectures, and this research argues that applying these will help to move the task of creating and sharing rubrics further away from simple compliance, and towards greater pedagogical impact and understanding between students and lecturers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflicts of interest reported.

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