Supporting students to understand assessment criteria

Schools should attempt to enhance students’ awareness of, and their engagement with, the assessment criteria that are used for their degree programme. Students should be assisted to have a better understanding of the expectations set out in the criteria and the relationships between these expectations and the types of approach that they can develop in response to them.

A combination of activities or exercises which require students to engage critically with assessment criteria may be effective. This list is not intended to be either exhaustive or prescriptive and provides examples of mechanisms that might be adopted:

- Essay planning exercises, where groups of students draft essay plans for titles provided by a member of staff, and then compare plans against the assessment criteria for the programme and identify areas that seem undeveloped;
- Practice essays with peer review and group tutorial discussion, or other types of peer assessment, which is a valuable graduate attribute. Student anxieties about peer marking due to academic ability can be countered by presenting exercises as focused on presentation or practical skills;
- Student involvement in the creation and negotiation of criteria to help them understand the vocabulary better, such as asking students (in groups) to rephrase the requirements of a piece of assessment in their own words;
- Marking exercises, where students are provided with an opportunity to mark and then discuss exemplars, or model answers. This could assist students in understanding how to structure their own work and the expectations of the programme, and also help to demystify the marking process. Involving students in a discussion about the distinctions between marking bands might also help to dispel student concerns about fair marking;
- Other examples of potentially useful activities, including peer assessment and marking workshops, can be found in the University’s Case Studies of Teaching Practice database;

Schools must also provide a breakdown of assessment criteria within degree programme handbooks. It may also be helpful to accompany this with a glossary or annotate the criteria with an explanation of common terms, e.g. feedback that asks students to be more critical may only be effective if students understand what this means.