

#WeAreInternational
Grants scheme 2022–24
Pilot project

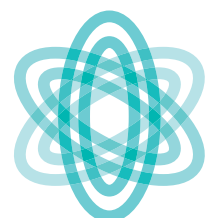
Democratising assessment rubrics: enhancing accessibility for international students

King's College London

Dr Chahna Gonsalves, Lecturer in Marketing (Education), Kings College London
Lucie Delobel and Daniel Drumm, Student Project Co-Creators
Sahil Bhawani, Isha Neerghin and Duy Anh Nguyen, Student Resource Co-Creators

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ip organisation that works to support international students and the institutions, students' unions and organisations who work closely with them.

The #WeAreInternational Grants scheme focuses on integrating the principles of the **#WeAreInternational Student Charter** in higher and further education institutions in the UK, to deliver a world-class international student experience, from pre-arrival to post-graduation.



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1. Project aims

This project aimed to demystify assessment rubrics for international students, a demographic that has traditionally faced challenges in this aspect of higher education. Acknowledging that undergraduate students, particularly those from international backgrounds, consistently report dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback, as evidenced by institutional evaluations and the National Student Survey (NSS), this project sought to address these concerns head-on.

The primary aim of this project was to enhance the comprehension of, and engagement with, assessment rubrics of first-year undergraduate international students. Rubrics serve as a key method of communicating assessment expectations.

2. Project outcomes

The project outcomes were multifaceted. The project facilitated a deeper understanding of assessment rubrics among students, including comprehension of assessment language and criteria. It also improved the ability of academics to design these tools with international students in mind.

One of the key deliverables was the development of guidance posters targeted at first-year undergraduate international students. These posters are designed to be engaging and readily available, offering a practical resource that contributes to the development of students' assessment literacy, that is their understanding of assessment and how to approach it as well as their ability to use assessment resources. The impact of these posters extends beyond international students, benefiting the wider student body by improving overall assessment practices.

A second deliverable was the development of a complementary set of posters targeted at academics. This sought to enhance their understanding of the challenges international students face with assessment rubrics and aid in the creation of more effective and inclusive assessment rubrics. The posters were also intended to contribute to pedagogical knowledge, teaching practice and professional development.

3. Background

Research indicates that students' dissatisfaction often stems, in part, from a limited understanding of assessment language and criteria and how criteria are used in marking their work (Reddy and Andrade, 2010; Carless and Boud, 2018). International students encounter greater difficulties than their domestic counterparts, primarily due to inadequate preparation, explanation and support throughout their assessment journey (Brown and Botfield, 2017). This issue is significant: international students constituted about 22% of the student population in UK universities in the 2020/21 academic year (Bolton and Lewis, 2022).

King's College London (KCL), a significant constituent of the University of London, is strategically located in London's centre, symbolising its global connectivity. It attracts a diverse international community, with international students constituting approximately 41% of its student body as of 2023. The university emphasises internationalisation as a core aspect of its strategic vision, King's Vision 2029, including fostering cultural competency and global leadership among students. This focus makes KCL an ideal setting for projects aimed at enhancing the educational experience of a substantial international student population.

By clearly defining the purpose of a task, the assessment criteria and the expected performance levels, rubrics can significantly improve the transparency of assessment processes and aid students in developing skills for self-assessment and evaluative judgment (Reddy and Andrade, 2010; Panadero and Jönsson, 2013). However, merely providing a rubric is insufficient for ensuring its effectiveness (Panadero and Jönsson, 2013). Educators often overlook the nuances of rubric language, which can be confusing for students, and other aspects of rubrics that could help students, leading to a perception that rubrics are less helpful in clarifying assessment aspects than educators assume (Li and Lindsey, 2015). This gap is particularly pronounced for international students, who may have diverse prior experiences with assessment rubrics and struggle to meet assessment expectations, which adversely affects their grades and overall experience (Wolf and Stevens, 2007).

This project not only focused on students but emphasised the need for academics to develop skills in designing and implementing effective rubrics. The Culturally Informed Assessment Toolkit (CIAT) developed by Brown and Botfield in their UKCISA 2017–18 project provided a foundational template for this purpose.

4. Project set-up

The project at KCL was set up using a participatory research model, involving international students in all research phases. A team, including an education-focused scholar and two international student research assistants, led the initiative. The assistants received training in focus group methodology and thematic analysis from an independent consultant. The study utilised focus groups for data collection, which encouraged diverse student participation and a safe space for students to share experiences. Ethics approval was obtained from the KCL Research Ethics Committee to permit the participatory research design, which allowed for deeper analysis of the focus group data (MRA-23/24-39740), leading to more informed project outputs.

5. Timescale

The project spanned nine months. Focus groups took place in the third month, followed by data transcription, coding and analysis in months four to six. The posters were implemented across the University via the learning management system in month nine.

6. Challenges

The project faced minimum challenges in its delivery. While about half the registered students did not attend the focus groups, this did not significantly hinder the project's progress. The reduced number of participants in each group led to more intimate discussions, allowing for rich and insightful contributions from those who attended. Despite this minor setback, the project was successfully executed without major impacts on its timeline or budget.

7. Sustainability

Ensuring the project's sustainability involved integrating resources into institutional frameworks and promoting digital access. The guide for students was incorporated into King's Academic Skills for Learning page, accessible to all students across the College via the learning management system. This digital accessibility facilitates easy sharing of guide links in academic materials, assessment documents and discussions, enhancing the resources' visibility and utility.

Academic guides were disseminated through the King's Inclusive Education Network and with 29 Rubric Champions through a Rubric Champions Microsoft Teams Channel, reaching staff across all nine faculties. The guides gained external visibility on the **National Teaching Repository**, evidencing interest with 347 views and 183 downloads, and have been adopted by York St John University for enhancing staff assessment literacy and supporting international students.

The project's enduring impact is assured by the versatile design of the posters, useful across disciplines and study levels, and broad dissemination through academic conferences and events. This widespread distribution ensures the project's contributions to enhancing assessment practices remain relevant and accessible, fostering continuous improvement in educational inclusivity.

8. Impact

The project catalysed a significant shift in the academic dialogue on assessment rubrics, particularly regarding their inclusivity and accessibility for international students.

Internal discussions and external presentations have initiated widespread conversation within the academic community, emphasising the need for assessment tools that cater for a diverse student population. This dialogue has not only occurred within KCL; it has extended to a broader audience through presentations at conferences and events. These include the Education Executive Committee Development Away Day at Royal Holloway University of London, the Advance HE Assessment and Feedback Symposium, the SHIFT Learning and Teaching Conference, “Inclusive Higher Education: Myths and Realities” at Greenwich University, and the London South Bank University Education and Student Experience Forum. These presentations served to disseminate the project’s findings and methodologies, fostering greater understanding of the challenges that international students face and potential strategies for addressing these issues.

The project’s influence extends beyond dialogue and awareness, evidenced by direct feedback and engagement from educators and administrators, who have expressed a willingness to reevaluate and refine their assessment rubrics based on the project’s insights.

The development of posters and guides, as practical outcomes of this study, has facilitated improvements in pedagogical practices and resource development, benefiting international students and the wider student body.

Moreover, the project’s findings have ignited conversation around potential implications for policy within educational institutions, suggesting a move towards more inclusive and effective assessment practices that consider the diverse needs of the student population. By identifying gaps in the current approach to rubrics, especially the use of generic versus customised rubrics, the project advocates for policy changes that prioritise inclusivity and effectiveness in assessment practices. This advocacy for change, coupled with the project’s external presentations, underscores the broader impact of the initiative, highlighting its role in driving forward the agenda for more inclusive education practices across the higher education sector.

9. Recommendations for other UK institutions

This project revealed that international students often face challenges in understanding assessment language and criteria, struggling with cultural and educational differences, and a lack of familiarity with the UK's educational assessment methods and instruments. Key challenges included:

- Students often find generic rubrics repetitive and unhelpful and show a preference for more tailored, assessment-specific rubrics that communicate expectations more clearly.
- The layout and design of rubrics, particularly in digital formats, significantly affect students' ability to engage with and effectively interpret them.
- The use of complex and specialised language in rubrics can pose a significant barrier, especially for non-native English speakers, often leading to misunderstandings and reduced effectiveness.
- Introducing rubrics late in the course often leaves students with insufficient time to align their work with the criteria, negatively impacting their motivation and performance.
- The transition from different education systems to the UK higher education system can result in students being unfamiliar with the use of rubrics, highlighting the need for more supportive guidance from educators.
- How rubrics are introduced and discussed in the classroom significantly influences students' engagement with them, indicating the need for more active and integrated teaching approaches.

These challenges highlight the need for more inclusive and culturally sensitive educational practices, especially in assessment design and communication. Based on these findings, other institutions might:

- Engage directly with international students to identify the unique challenges they face in understanding assessment methods, gaining insights into cultural and educational differences.
- Create a supportive classroom environment where international students can comfortably access help and resources, such as by providing glossaries and directing them to external resources to aid their comprehension and academic success.
- Ensure rubrics are aligned with course objectives and consistently referenced throughout teaching to help students understand their relation to learning and assessments.
- Introduce international students to the UK Higher Education grading system using exemplars in assessment briefs, aiding their understanding of different performance standards.
- Equip educators with skills in culturally responsive teaching methods to better support the diverse needs of international students, fostering an inclusive learning environment.

- Continuously evaluate assessment methods and incorporate student feedback to ensure they remain effective and inclusive for international students.
- Design rubrics that are straightforward and clear, avoiding complex academic jargon that can be challenging for international students.
- Provide supplementary materials like guidance sheets or glossaries to help students understand complex terms or criteria in rubrics.

The project highlights the need for continued focus on inclusive education practices, specifically in the development and deployment of assessment rubrics. Recommendations for other UK institutions include integrating student feedback into rubric design, ensuring accessible communication and aligning rubrics with coursework and teaching. The project underscores the significance of adapting to the diverse educational backgrounds of international students, aiding them in transitioning to the UK education context.

10. Links to further information

[Guidance posters](#)

[KCL project website](#)

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UKCISA

Woburn House
20–24 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9HQ
ukcisa.org.uk
@ukcisa

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