

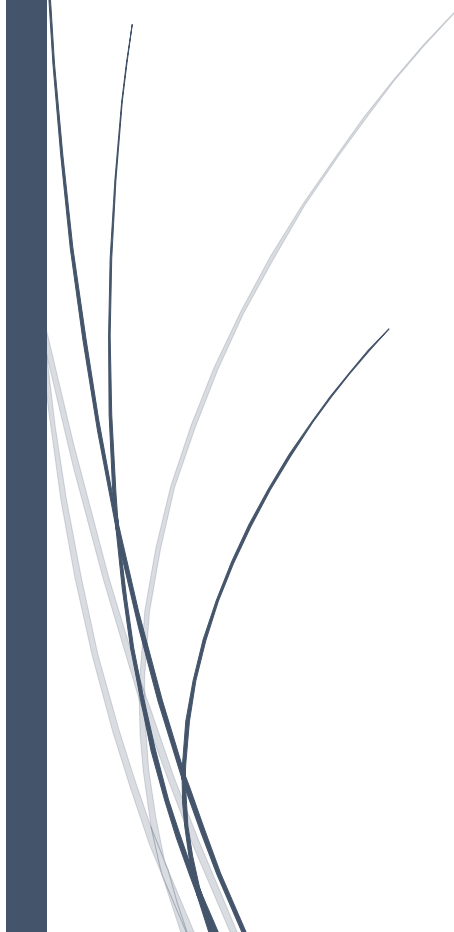


# Toolkit: making the language of assessment inclusive

Part of a QAA Collaborative  
Enhancement Project Led by the  
University of the West of England

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Project partners: University of the West of  
England, Bristol (lead), University of Brighton,  
University of Greenwich, University of  
Hertfordshire



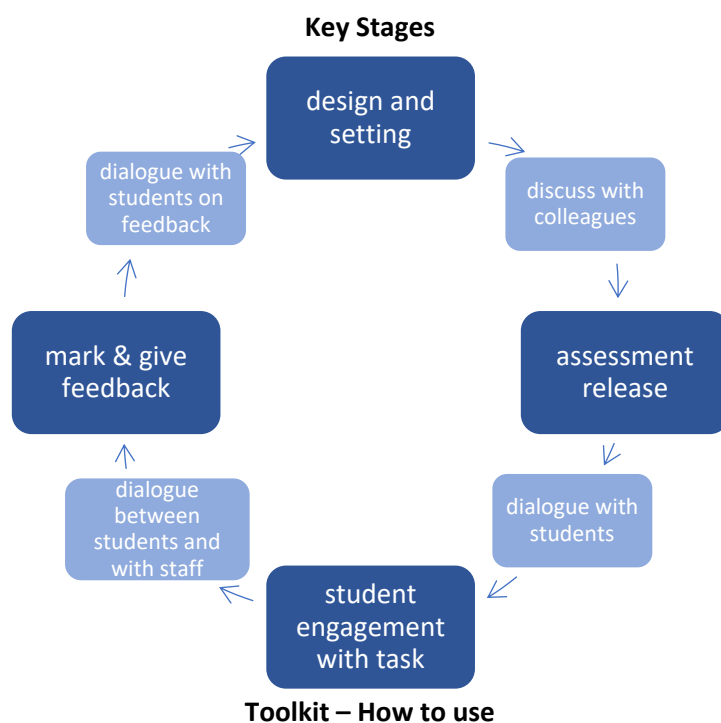
## Overview

This resource is an output from a Collaborative Enhancement Project supported and funded by QAA Membership. The project was led by the University of the West of England, Bristol in partnership with the University of Brighton, University of Greenwich and University of Hertfordshire.

Find out more about Collaborative Enhancement Projects on the [QAA website](#).

The toolkit has been developed as the main outcome of a cross-institutional collaborative project, funded by the Quality Assurance Agency during 2021-22. The focus of the project was a critical enquiry into what we term the “mysterious quotients” of commonly used assessment terms and phrases; a survey and follow up interviews and focus groups with staff and students across all four partner institutions formed a data set which has informed this toolkit.

The focus of the toolkit is on encouraging **dialogue** around the language used in assessments, between staff, staff and students, and among students. The toolkit offers you an opportunity to interrogate your practice and support students via a series of prompt questions at key stages of the assessment and feedback process (design; introduction of assessment brief to students; marking and giving feedback) – these form a cyclical process with opportunities for reflection and enhancement throughout.



In this toolkit, you will find the key stages (above) outlined. Starting with a hypothetical scenario or a number of scenarios, the toolkit stages are not meant to be prescriptive lists but rather an “inspirational toolbox” to start you thinking about the assessment journey as part of a cyclical development in dialogue with a range of parties.

**The toolkit can be used in conjunction with [Appendix 1 - list of terms ranked by student levels of confidence](#)**

Many of you will have institutional and/or discipline-specific resources you can use to support you as you engage with the toolkit; there are many freely available resources across the sector (including QAA resources) and we encourage you to explore these.

## Assessment Design and Setting

Consider the following scenario:

You are new to your institution and have inherited a range of modules as module leader; one of the modules appears to have been assessed almost exclusively by instructing students to “critically analyse” a generic quote. You are concerned that students will not understand what is meant by this and how to approach the task.

The assessment design and setting stage is staff-focused and the toolkit below is meant to provide pointers towards staff dialogue, but could also be used when students are involved in the co-creation of assessments.

**STAFF – STAFF DIALOGUE**

<b>THEMES</b>	Questions by staff to other staff in the design process	Additional queries or considerations to explore:
<b>Pre-assessment Design</b>	What is my intention in the use of language when setting the assessment instructions (choice of terminology/words)?	<p>Is the language I am using clear in setting out the assessment instructions? Am I being as clear as possible with the terms I'm using? Do the words used make the task clear? The words I choose may have different meaning in common parlance as opposed to how they are used with my discipline.</p> <p>A good starting point is to consider common instruction words like 'critically analyse'. Is there potential ambiguity – would this be clear to others including, for instance, international students?</p>
	What kind of assumptions am I making – cf 'hidden curriculum'?	<p>Am I assuming that all the students who are taking this module will understand the task instructions (in the same way) or have encountered them before?</p> <p>NB: there is a difference here between the language of instruction and any discipline-specific terminology/concepts you may wish students to define/explore.</p>
<b>Assessment design</b>	What am I looking to assess?	What range/types of tasks/use of instruction words/language will enable students to best demonstrate their learning? (Is the assessment constructively aligned with the learning outcomes?)
	What tools does this module provide?	Will the module provide students with relevant tools to complete the task/s? If not, how/where can they access these?

	Have I involved everyone sufficiently in the design of the task/s?	Who else do I need to liaise with / consult (team; support services etc)?
<b>Use of instruction words and assessment language</b>	Is the language sufficiently clear / accessible / inclusive?	<p>Does the language reflect appropriate FHEQ/SEEC descriptors?</p> <p>Do the assessment / instruction words meet relevant module learning outcomes?</p> <p>Have I accounted for the 'mysterious quotient'? (refer to Appendix 1)</p> <p>Does this term have a specific meaning in my (discipline) context / culture? How can I make sure the words used are clear and understood (e.g., do I wish to provide a glossary of terms)?</p>
	Do all the module /marking team have the same understanding of the task instructions?	Do all the markers have a similar interpretation of the instruction words (has there been an opportunity for calibration?)
<b>Assessment/ marking criteria or scheme</b>	What are the criteria against which this submission is going to be assessed?	<p>Are the assessment criteria properly reflected in the assessment language?</p> <p>Where, when and how will I embed dialogue with students about the marking criteria and their understanding of the language used?</p>
<b>Feedback design</b>	What type of feedback will be provided?	<p>If I have used a similar task before, what questions did students raise (if any) on the language of the feedback I provided?</p> <p>Does the task embed opportunities for students to demonstrate engagement with previous feedback?</p>

<b>Assessment support</b>	What, if any, are my plans for providing assessment support?	<p>What will I use to help students engage with the language of assessment (consider using resources such as exemplars et cetera)</p> <p>Do I need to provide additional support like an assessment video?</p> <p>(For) what kind of questions should I prepare?</p>
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## Assessment Brief Release

Consider the following scenarios:

### **Scenario 1**

A new module leader has just given a sample assessment brief to their students in a seminar. They have asked the students if everyone understands the brief, and the students have all nodded, but offered no comment. However, they are concerned that the students are just holding their thoughts and questions back and will quietly struggle later on.

### **Scenario 2**

A student has just received an assessment brief, and is completely lost. They don't understand any of the language used in the question and have no idea where to turn.

### **Scenario 3**

A mature level 4 student attends an assessment support session and is feeling anxious. They tell the module leader they are confused and unsure how to get started on their work. They have looked up key words in the assessment brief in a dictionary, but it hasn't helped.

At the assessment brief release stage, the range of opportunities for dialogue opens up for conversations between staff and students and among students.

	Questions   Staff	Additional queries or considerations to explore:	Questions   Students	Additional queries or considerations to explore:
THEMES	Questions for staff to consider when introducing the assessment task/s		Questions for students to ask themselves (and staff) about the brief	
Use of instruction words and assessment language	Have the instructions and all the terminology been explained sufficiently?	<p>Do I need to point students to other sources and, if so, what are these/where can they be found?</p> <p>How will I know that all students understand the terminology used? (Refer to <a href="#">Appendix 1 - list of terms ranked by student levels of confidence</a>)</p> <p>What activities can I embed to provide opportunities for students to discuss their understanding of the task/s?</p>	What am I being asked to do?	<p>Do I know all words used in the brief and what they, in this context, mean?</p> <p>Do I know how to respond to the assessment instructions?</p>
Assessment/mark ing criteria or scheme	What opportunities for dialogue are embedded in the module for students to engage with the language used in the criteria?	For instance, do we provide any of the following: jargon buster, Q&A session, use of exemplars, opportunities for formative assessment, peer assessment, ...	Do I understand what criteria will be used to mark my work?	<p>Where do I find the criteria?</p> <p>Have I had / made use of an opportunity to use/engage with these before?</p> <p>Did I understand the requirements / language used at the time?</p>



<p><b>Reflective practice / feedback design</b></p>	<p>What feedback am I planning on providing and when?</p>	<p>Do I have a set of generic guidance/FAQs derived from previous student questions?</p> <p>Have I explained how feedback will be given (and by whom)?</p> <p>Do students know how to use previous feedback and what action to take to address the words/language used?</p> <p>Are there opportunities for students to use previous feedback to inform this task?</p> <p>Does drawing on previous feedback form part of the assessment task?</p>	<p>Have I been asked to do this kind of activity before?</p>	<p>Do I have feedback on similar/previous tasks that I can use to inform my understanding?</p> <p>What kind of assumptions am I making about the language I encountered before?</p> <p>Could I explain the words used to another student?</p> <p>How can I plan this better – where can I go for clarification of the words/language/terminology used?</p>
<p><b>Assessment support</b></p>	<p>Does the assessment brief include how students can access additional language support?</p>	<p>What resources are there available for students to find out more and how can they be 'linked up'?</p>	<p>Is assessment support available?</p>	<p>Does the support offered truly help?</p> <p>Where do I go if I continue to struggle?</p>

## Student Engagement with Assessment

Consider the following scenario:

A student approaches a member of library staff for help with their assignment because they remembered, from their induction, that there is help available from the library if they get stuck with their studies. The student is distraught because they do not understand the question posed in the assessment brief, dare not approach their module leader in case they think poorly of them, and don't know if there is a personal tutor in the School that they could approach.

During the stage when students engage with the assessment towards writing up and submission, different conversations and opportunities for dialogue may arise. Some no doubt will require going back to the 'release stage' for reminders but new avenues for engagement may also raise new and previously unexplored aspects.

	Questions   Staff	Additional queries or considerations to explore:	Questions   Students	Additional queries or considerations to explore:
THEMES	Questions for staff to consider during the assessment process		Questions by students to staff and / or other students about the brief and anything arising as part of their engagement	
<b>Ongoing Assessment Support</b>	What other/ongoing support is there on offer for students during this phase?	<p>Are there (in-class) opportunities for students to test out ideas, present work-in-progress and/or seek clarification on words/language/terminology?</p> <p>Are there formative tasks that promote dialogue around expectations and language used in tasks?</p>	While working on my assessment, am I sure I have fully understood the instruction words and the assessment terminology?	<p>Do I know who to ask if I am unclear about the task?</p> <p>Do I have ongoing opportunities to ask questions about the task and/or try out ideas?</p>

## Marking and Feedback

Consider the following scenarios:

### **Scenario 1**

Students have submitted their assessment and have been told that their marks and feedback will be released in line with their University's Policies. Students, however, are anxious about receiving their marks and feel that the process is taking too long

### **Scenario 2**

A programme leader is concerned about student feedback suggesting they do not always find the marking criteria clear, and that assessment and marking are not always perceived as fair. The module leaders include both new and experienced colleagues, some of whom do not speak English as their first language. The programme leader wants to organise a development session to address these issues as a team.

Once students have submitted their assessment and marking by staff is under way, the conversations and opportunities for dialogue and future avenues for exploration open up.

	Questions   Staff	Additional queries or considerations to explore:	Questions   Students	Additional queries or considerations to explore:
THEMES	Questions for staff as part of marking and feedback release		Questions by students to staff / other students arising as part of the feedback released	
<b>Engagement with assessment/marketing criteria or scheme</b>	What is the staff understanding of the criteria and the language used?	Does the marking team share similar understandings of the criteria used? (Follow up to design stage at which this should have been explored but maybe a new team member has joined in the meantime).	Do I understand the language of the criteria?	What assumptions am I making about the terminology that was used previously?  Did I understand it at the time?
<b>Use of Feedback Template</b>	Is there a feedback template and if so, is it clear, accessible and useful in both layout and language used?	What moderation processes exist to review feedback templates?	Do I understand what the feedback template is telling me in general terms?	What assumptions am I making about the terminology? Do I understand the words/language used?  Have I used feedback I received previously to its full potential (e.g. have I even looked at this before)?

<p><b>Use of Feedback Language</b></p>	<p>What words do I commonly use to provide feedback?</p>	<p>Does my feedback make sense, i.e., is it clear?</p> <p>Do I use words that may be ambiguous or unclear (e.g. to non-native speakers)</p> <p>Is the language inclusive (in terms of, for example growth mindset)?</p> <p>Do I use appropriate language that is constructive, objective and practical?</p> <p>Does the language used encourage the student to take ownership of their learning?</p>	<p>Do I understand the individual feedback I have received?</p>	<p>Are there words/terms that are unclear?</p> <p>Is it clear what I did well and what I need to do to improve?</p>
	<p>Do mark and feedback language match the assessment / marking criteria or scheme?</p>	<p>Have I clearly explained what I mean by feedback terms such as structure, critical, reflection, synthesis etc? [link to words/terms in assessment criteria]</p>	<p>Does the mark I received make sense in light of the feedback language?</p>	<p>Do my mark and the feedback relate back to the assessment criteria?</p> <p>Do the terms used make sense in light of the mark and the feedback received?</p>

<p><b>Opportunities for clarification/engagement</b></p>	<p>Do I provide further opportunities for students to seek clarification?</p>	<p>If this assessment is partly formative, do I embed activities which enable students to demonstrate engagement with feedback going forward?</p> <p>Do I embed opportunities for dialogue about feedback within the module? Between students?</p> <p>Do I know what the next assessment/s will be so I can genuinely feed forward?</p>	<p>What opportunities to I have for further clarification?</p>	<p>Which words/terms are the most troublesome/difficult for me to understand and relate to?</p> <p>To whom can I go for clarification?</p>
<p><b>Points of / for Reflection</b></p>	<p>Does my feedback and the words/terminology used build in a 'growth mindset'?</p>	<p>Do I provide constructive points on which to build?</p> <p>Do I include activities which require students to engage with their feedback?</p>	<p>What do I do with this now?</p>	<p>How do I use this in my next assessment task/s?</p> <p>Which words/terms remain unclear?</p> <p>How can I build on this / find out more about the words / terminology used?</p>

## Appendix 1 - list of terms ranked by student levels of confidence

<b>Words used in assessment briefs - Confidence levels in understanding</b>			
<b>Certain</b>	<b>Quite confident</b>	<b>Not very confident</b>	<b>Not at all confident</b>
Define	Demonstrate	Inform	Synthesise
	Evaluate	Review	
	Reflect	Critical	
	Develop	Explore	
	Carefully	Examine	
	Assess		
	Interpret		
	Discuss		
	Explain		
	Reference		
	Analyse		
	Summarise		
	Meet		

<b>Words used in feedback - Confidence levels in understanding</b>			
<b>Certain</b>	<b>Quite confident</b>	<b>Not very confident</b>	<b>Not at all confident</b>
Successfully	Relevance	Reflective	Superficial analysis
Fails to answer the question	Appropriate	Abstract	
	Properly		
	Indicate		
	Vague		
	Concrete		
	Wide		
	Academic		
	Professional		
	Descriptive		
	Application of theory		
	Suitably		
	Effective		
	The literature		
	Logical		