

## What Is At Stake When Developing and Using a Rubric to Judge Chemistry Honours Dissertations for Entry into a PhD?

**Authors :** Moira Cordiner

**Abstract :** As a result of an Australian university approving a policy to improve the quality of assessment practices, as an academic developer (AD) with expertise in criterion-referenced assessment commenced in 2008. The four-year appointment was to support 40 'champions' in their Schools. This presentation is based on the experiences of a group of Chemistry academics who worked with the AD to develop and implement an honours dissertation rubric. Honours is a research year following a three-year undergraduate year. If the standard of the student's work is high enough (mainly the dissertation) then the student can commence a PhD. What became clear during the process was that much more was at stake than just the successful development and trial of the rubric, including academics' reputations, university rankings and research outputs. Working with the champion-Head of School(HOS) and the honours coordinator, the AD helped them adapt an honours rubric that she had helped create and trial successfully for another Science discipline. A year of many meetings and complex power plays between the two academics finally resulted in a version that was critiqued by the Chemistry teaching and learning committee. Accompanying the rubric was an explanation of grading rules plus a list of supervisor expectations to explain to students how the rubric was used for grading. Further refinements were made until all staff were satisfied. It was trialled successfully in 2011, then small changes made. It was adapted and implemented for Medicine honours with her help in 2012. Despite coming to consensus about statements of quality in the rubric, a few academics found it challenging matching these to the dissertations and allocating a grade. They had had no time to undertake training to do this, or make overt their implicit criteria and standards, which some admitted they were using - 'I know what a first class is'. Other factors affecting grading included: the small School where all supervisors knew each other and the students, meant that friendships and collegiality were at stake if low grades were given; no external examiners were appointed-all were internal with the potential for bias; supervisors' reputations were at stake if their students did not receive a good grade; the School's reputation was also at risk if insufficient honours students qualified for PhD entry; and research output was jeopardised without enough honours students to work on supervisors' projects. A further complication during the study was a restructure of the university and retrenchments, with pressure to increase research output as world rankings assumed greater importance to senior management. In conclusion, much more was at stake than developing a usable rubric. The HOS had to be seen to champion the 'new' assessment practice while balancing institutional demands for increased research output and ensuring as many honours dissertations as possible met high standards, so that eventually the percentage of PhD completions and research output rose. It is therefore in the institution's best interest for this cycle to be maintained as it affects rankings and reputations. In this context, are rubrics redundant?

**Keywords :** explicit and implicit standards, judging quality, university rankings, research reputations

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