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Qualitatively different ways of differentiating student achievement: a phenomenographic study of academics’ conceptions of grade descriptors

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The term ‘grade descriptors’ has commonly been used to refer to the practice of describing for students characteristic work that would merit different grades. This paper reports the results of a phenomenographic study on the different ways that academic staff understood and practised grade descriptors as forms of standards-based assessment. Four qualitatively different conceptions of grade descriptors were identified. Firstly, grade descriptors were described as ‘generic descriptors’ as they depict achievement levels as descriptions of standards for generic purposes. Secondly, grade descriptors were understood as ‘grade distributors’ as they focus on how students’ work can be understood in terms of how they are distributed amongst different levels of achievement. Thirdly, grade descriptors were labelled as ‘grade indicators’ since they indicate to staff and students what a piece of student’s work might mean in terms of specific criteria. Finally, grade descriptors were labelled as grade interpreters since they are perceived as authentic bodies of intrinsic meaning as to what actual achievement levels are. Through its findings, this study seeks to provide a basis for identifying and resolving different expectations for understanding and practising grade descriptors as well as clarifying the place of standards and criteria in assessment. Each of the conceptions is discussed in terms of providing a form of standards-based assessment. Suggestions for enhancing the use of grade descriptors as standards-based assessment are then made.

Introduction

Norm-referenced assessment and criterion-referenced assessment are two primary models of summative assessment of students’ learning (Biggs 1999). However, both models are limited in their ability to provide both students and academic staff with a shared and consistent understanding of what is meant by a particular grade or level of achievement. Neil and Wadley (1999) have criticized the distinction between norm referencing and criterion referencing as oversimplified dichotomies of assessment. In
their binary applications, norm-referenced assessment and criterion-referenced assessment mirror the confusion between criteria and standards in assessment (Sadler, 1987).

Norm-referenced assessment purports to measure and describe individual achievement in comparative terms (Taylor, 1994). Its effect is to rank order student achievement between different students without reference to the individual student’s actual achievement. Norm-referenced assessment therefore communicates to students that their actual assessed achievement is determined in terms of relative merit rather than actual merit.

In contrast, criterion-referenced assessment purports to provide the basis for a standards model of achievement by assessing students against an external objective standard (Biggs, 1999). The standard or the measure of a student’s achievement is interpreted in terms of a clearly defined and delimited domain of learning tasks (Linn & Gronlund, 1995). However, their ability to measure and describe students’ achievement in terms of different grades has been questioned. For example, Brown et al. (1997) argue that in criterion-referenced assessment ‘only the pass/fail point is important’ (p. 12) since its objective is to determine if students have met certain criteria of their tasks.

Increasingly, standards-based assessment or the provision of clear and unambiguous descriptions of required standards of performance by teachers to students is being emphasized as good assessment practice. Hawe (2002) describes standards based-assessment or standards-referenced assessment as emphasizing ‘explicit specification of standards, the use of teachers’ qualitative judgements and development of shared understandings regarding the interpretation and operationalization of these standards’ (p. 94). Buckles et al. (2001) argue that clear descriptions of standards of performance are important for informing students what they are expected to learn and how they should perform in their assessed work and for informing teachers how they can assess students accordingly.

In their extreme forms, both norm- and criterion-referenced assessment fall short of providing a clear basis for clearly describing to students and staff what different standards of achievement entail. This problem is compounded by the difficulty of communicating students’ achievements in the form of grades. In this context, the practice of grade descriptors offers an alternative approach to achieving standards-based assessment by purporting to describe to students characteristic work that would merit different grades.

This paper reports the results of a phenomenographic study on the different ways that academic staff in a particular university understood and practised grade descriptors. The study sought to contribute to the ongoing efforts in the university to achieve meaningful descriptions of standards that can assist students and teachers in their learning and assessment by articulating the variation in the purposes and practices of grade descriptors in the form of conceptions. This variation is depicted as a hierarchy of logically related conceptions of grade descriptors.

**Background**

This phenomenographic study aimed to investigate and describe the variation in academics’ experiences of using and understanding grade descriptors. It was
conducted in a large research-intensive metropolitan university which had recently introduced the policy of using grade descriptors to support greater use of standards-based assessment. The university had sought to encourage greater use of standards-based assessment in view of recognizing some of the deficiencies of norm-referenced assessment. In this context, the use of grade descriptors was recommended for academic staff as an approach for introducing standards-based assessment in the university.

The formal policy of grade descriptors in this university referred to the practice of describing for students characteristic work that would merit different grades. An extract from the formal policy directive on grade descriptors is provided in Appendix 1.

This study investigates the different practices and understandings of grade descriptors amongst academic staff at its early stage of implementation. At that juncture, it could not be assumed that academics across the university understood and implemented the policy on grade descriptors in the same manner. The findings of this study serve to identify the range of issues that the policy is raising. These results are utilized as the basis for further research and development of the policy of grade descriptors in the university.

**Methodology**

Phenomenography has been credited as ‘an internationally valued educational research method since the 1970s’ (Ashworth & Ursula, 2000, p. 295). As an approach to qualitative research, phenomenography is the process of describing variations in peoples’ experiences of phenomena through their own discourse. Its aim is to investigate and present ‘the qualitatively different ways in which something is experienced’ (Saljo, 1997, p. 174). The ultimate goal of phenomenography is to describe the qualitatively different ways in which we understand our experience of phenomena in the world around us (Barnard et al., 1999). Phenomenography is about the description of things (phenomenon) as they appear to us. Its characteristic outcome is a description of the qualitatively different ways that a group of individuals experience a phenomenon. Marton and Booth (1997) describe the basis of phenomenography as ‘an interest in describing the phenomena in the world as others see them, and in revealing and describing the variation therein, especially in an educational context’ (p. 111).

The purpose of the study was to obtain a sense of the variation of the ways in which grade descriptors were practised and used in order to facilitate academic staff development. Fifteen academic staff in the university were identified as having used a form of grade descriptors in the first year of the formal introduction of the policy in the university. In-depth interviews were then conducted with seven academics.

The subsequent analysis yielded four qualitatively different conceptions of grade descriptors which emphasize different aspects of the formal policy on grade descriptors that the academics were implementing in their respective contexts. The four conceptions formed a coherent set of qualitatively different conceptions and meet the phenomenographic criteria for a well-structured outcome space.
Overview of results

Conception 1. Grade descriptors as generic descriptors

Generic descriptors do not depict actual achievement levels. Grade descriptors are used to determine if students should progress to the next level of study. Academics who share this view of grade descriptors utilize the grade descriptors for credentialing purposes only.

Conception 2. Grade descriptors as grade distributors

Grade distributors are tentative but inadequate depictions of actual achievement levels. Grade descriptors are used to moderate the final assessment results to achieve a norm-referenced distribution of results. This view of grade descriptors emphasizes point (e) of the formal policy to ‘use norm-referenced statistics to moderate the results of standards-based assessment’.

Conception 3. Grade descriptors as grade indicators

Grade indicators are primary but incomplete depictions of actual achievement levels. Grade descriptors serve as indicative benchmarks of different achievement levels which may require refinement. This view of grade descriptors emphasizes point (d) of the formal policy to ‘grade assessments against the benchmarks and to discuss the outcomes to refine the standards’.

Conception 4. Grade descriptors as grade interpreters

Grade interpreters are primary and comprehensive depictions of actual achievement levels. Grade interpreters represent the definitive interpretation of different levels of achievement to academic staff and to their students. Such grade descriptors serve as a shared basis for academic staff and students to hold a common understanding of different levels or standards of achievement. Academic staff are able to utilize these descriptors to convey their expectations of students work and utilize the same descriptors to subsequently assess and evaluate students’ work.

The four conceptions are logically related to each other. The relations between the conceptions can be explained in terms of the referential (meaning) aspect and the structural (thematic) aspect.

The attributed meaning of grade descriptors (the referential aspect). This categorizes the conceptions in terms of the meaning that is discerned from the structure of each conception within themselves and against each other. In this context, the referential aspect is a further discernment of grade descriptors in terms of understanding the dialectic tension between the meaning and the structures (both internal and external) of the conceptions.
Academics’ conceptions of grade descriptors (the structural aspect). This orders the conceptions according to the assessment theme that is foregrounded. The thematic emphasis is obtained by discerning the assessment theme in each conception against its context, as well as the relationships between its constituent parts. The themes that characterize each conception are drawn from the structural relationships of assessment and achievement levels.

The conceptions are ordered as a hierarchical series of expanding conceptions of grade descriptors. The conceptions are envisaged as evolving subsets, each subsuming and building on the previous conception. The assumption is that the more complete the conception, the more sophisticated the understanding of grade descriptors. In this context, conception 4 may be seen as the complete and most sophisticated way of understanding grade descriptors.

Results

Conception 1. Generic descriptors

The meaning of grade descriptors as generic descriptors. Grade descriptors are not deemed to possess any valid meaning in themselves or any use in assessing students. They do not offer any useful knowledge for understanding and assessing students’ achievement levels. The grades in themselves do not hold out any meaning as to achievement standards and no effort is made to describe what different levels of achievement may mean:

I haven’t come up with different descriptors for the different grade levels. So I haven’t said that a HD will do such and such.

Instead, the grade descriptors are seen as an external constraint which does not relate to the actual assessment process. There is a discrepancy between assessing students’ work against detailed criteria and describing the students’ work in terms of a grade description. This can be seen in its depiction as an obligation to external authority:

By grade descriptors I’m talking about the grades that we are required to report back to the university.

The theme of grade descriptors as generic descriptors. In this conception, grade descriptors may be labelled ‘generic descriptors’ as they depict achievement levels as descriptions of standards for generic purposes. This conception emphasizes the credentialling function of grade descriptors. They are not used to define levels of achievement for different grades. Instead, grading students into different achievement levels are achieved by assessing students’ work against detailed task-related criteria. Subsequently, students’ work is then categorized into broad grade categories for credentialling:

It is an external constraint. I am more interested in the extent they meet the task related criteria and then after that it gets slotted into the external grades.

Such a conception consigns grade descriptors to a postscript to the assessment process. Because they are detached from the assessment process, they are only used
after the assessment process has been completed. Grade descriptors are not deemed to be useful for feedback on students’ performance. Instead, their purpose is to signify, in broad terms, whether students are fit to progress:

> I only see it (grade descriptors) as a credentialling mechanism. In terms of feedback and information for them I see the extent which they make the tasks fit the criteria as meeting that need, and I see the use of the external grades as meeting another need, which is progression through the degree.

**Conception 2. Grade distributors**

*The meaning of grade descriptors as grade distributors.* Grade descriptors are deemed to reflect a semblance of actual achievement standards but are not sufficient to differentiate students’ work into different grade levels in themselves. Instead, they are understood as a tentative explanation of achievement standards which are subject to normative truths. Grade distributors are deemed to be successful when anticipated grade distributions are achieved, and this is perceived as being reassuring to students:

> I guess the only way you know (that grade descriptors have been successful) is whether students understand what you want of them and you see this in your distribution of marks in the end.

Unlike conception 4, grade descriptors are not understood as being able to precisely define actual levels of achievement in students’ work. Instead, grade descriptors are understood as possessing some relation to actual achievement levels by operating as general categories of achievement for which students’ work may be differentiated against. In this context, grade distributors are associated with actual achievement standards but must be flexible in order to accommodate other truth-finding mechanisms:

> The other thing is that we live in a world of distributions and I don’t believe in absolute set standards that are inflexible standards.

*The theme of grade descriptors as grade distributors.* In the second conception, grade descriptors can be labelled as ‘grade distributors’ as they focus on how students’ work can be understood in terms of how they are distributed amongst different levels of achievement. This emphasizes the use of grade descriptions as a classification of different achievement levels. The ‘grade classification’ serves as an assessment tool for staff to group assignments into different categories of achievement. This conception focuses on how students’ work should be distributed according to the different achievement levels rather than how each piece of student work should be judged against pre-existing descriptions of achievement levels:

> I think that there has to be a balance between grade descriptors and some sort of normative distribution because you know very well that with a big group of students you can expect the distributions to be fairly similar.

In addition to recognizing that grade descriptors reflect the general credentials of different standards (conception 1), this conception goes further to envisage it as a tool to identify different standards. Unlike conceptions 3 and 4, there is little
emphasis on feedback to the students as to their actual achievement level. Instead, grade distributors serve to direct students’ efforts by identifying the different expectations in assigned work:

So I guess I am trying to say to them ‘here’s where to put your efforts’ and not have it some sort of secret thing, I think it’s fair for them. I don’t like the idea that students get bad marks, not because they haven’t got ability or the knowledge, but they just put in their efforts in the wrong direction, and we’ve stated this is the right direction.

Conception 3. Grade indicators

The meaning of grade descriptors as grade indicators. Grade descriptors are understood as being useful in articulating actual achievement levels. They are not treated as tentative depictions of achievement standards that are subject to other truths (e.g. conception 2). Instead, they are recognized as a primary source of knowledge against which students’ work may be assessed. In particular, they remind assessors of the actual assessment criteria they wish to employ:

The most useful thing for me is that they often articulate some of the things that I can sort of see. I am conscious of the strengths or the weakness of a particular piece of work but you know sometimes can’t put my finger on it.

However, unlike conception 4, grade indicators are limited in their ability to depict the full range of desired qualities of students’ work. This in turn compromises the ability of grade indicators in comprehensively differentiating different levels of achievement in students’ work. Grade indicators are therefore useful but incomplete depictions of actual achievement standards:

I think that you’ve got to allow for the sort of variation and the more indefinable qualities in students’ work. If we were more consistent in the application of grade descriptors that would give the students more confidence. But if we did that then I think you’d lose some of those less definable qualities. I mean it’s very hard to pin down those sort of things to allow you to turn them into a sort of specific grade.

In turn, the grade indicators guide students in understanding their achievement in terms of different standards and the criteria provide further information on how their work may improve:

For the student, it’s certainly a guide for them to interpret the marks they’ve received and to perhaps expand on the comments that are on the essay itself. So they can go to the mark and sort of see where they fit and what better expectation might have been. What improvements where they could be improving to get higher marks.

The theme of grade descriptors as grade indicators. Grade descriptors in this context can be labelled as ‘grade indicators’ since they indicate to staff and students what a piece of student’s work might mean in terms of specific criteria. The assessment of students’ work against detailed criteria is emphasized and the focus is in identifying the different criteria for each grade as a common platform for staff and students:

Identifying in a sort of clear way what particular grades mean both for the students and the staff in marking them so that both are working on the same sort of expectations as to what a grade might mean.
The grade indicators also assist assessors by providing criteria to indicate the desired qualities they are looking for in students’ work:

From the staff’s point of view, when I am uncertain of a mark I’ll often go back to grade descriptors and sort of find them useful to identify the qualities I’m looking for and it sometimes helps to position a student.

Like conception 2, grade indicators play a role in categorizing students’ achievements. However, this conception goes further by understanding the classificatory role of grade descriptors as a starting point and not as the final objective in assessment:

Grade descriptors operate as a sort of starting point for putting different sets of essays in different categories.

Not only do grade indicators assist in the general categorization of students’ work as a preliminary act in assessment, they also indicate the essence of each achievement level as a guide for assessors to confirm their provisional judgement:

Read a piece of work and make up your mind as to what a provisional mark might be and then read it against the grade descriptor and see if it’s fitting in. You know be sort of positive about them but use them as a guide rather than having a final determination of what the mark should be.

Conception 4. Grade interpreters

The meaning of grade descriptors as grade interpreters. Grade interpreters are representative of the actual standards which students are assessed against and the actual standards from which students can understand the meaning of their grades. They are used as a primary and comprehensive source of understanding and assessing students’ work in terms of different standards. Each grade represents an unambiguous statement of the student’s achievement and communicates their assessed proficiency in definite terms:

When we give somebody a credit or distinction result, what we are saying to these people in terms of the policy in our faculty is that you have the capacity to be able to enrol in the Honours programme.

Whilst conceptions 2 and 3 operate on the basis that grade descriptors are closely associated with actual achievement levels, conception 4 perceives grade descriptors as possessing intrinsic meaning as to achievement standards. Grade interpreters in this sense function as an empirical reference from which assessors can clarify their doubts:

It is a pathway for me and so I do use them as a useful reference point. Like you know I think a performance is a pass then maybe I have to decide just whether it’s a high pass or a low-medium pass. Then I look at the descriptors and you know there is some leeway.

The theme of grade descriptors as grade interpreters. In this conception, grade descriptors can be labelled as ‘grade interpreters’ by focusing on pre-existing standards and serving as authentic bodies of intrinsic meaning as to what actual achievement levels are. There is no discrepancy between standards envisaged before an assignment is
given and standards used to assess students. In this respect, grade interpreters enable academic staff to communicate clearly what grades and standards mean:

Grade descriptors are about making clear to the students what a particular mark is. What kind of performance we expect from the students if they are going to be given that particular mark.

Because grade interpreters can envisage grade descriptors as depicting actual achievement standards, it is able to include the full range of considerations in the assessment process. Hence, it understands that grades serve a credentialling function for generic purposes by portraying achievement in very general terms (conception 1). It recognizes that actual achievement may be represented as being distributed according to different levels (conception 2). It appreciates that the essence of each level of achievement should be articulated so as to provide assessors and students with a critical sense of standards (conception 3). What grade interpreters add to these considerations is the notion that it can represent actual achievement and not varying (and limited) portrayals of standards. A conception of grade descriptors as grade interpreters ultimately views grades and standards as synonymous:

We actually have got criteria that try to differentiate different levels of performance, so that students are able to make some choice about which level they want to aim for.

Grade interpreters allow assessors to convey, in comprehensive terms, what actual assessment standards are. In turn, this allows students to understand the precise expectations of different achievement standards and what this means in terms of their assessed work:

An outcomes based approach unpacks the teacher’s head. So the students know what it is they have to do and it is then their responsibility to decide how they are going to respond to the criteria. The learner then gets a lot of feedback on where it is that they need to adjust and improve.

Summary of results

The variation in academics’ experience of grade descriptors can be described in terms of the variation in the ability of grade descriptors to depict unambiguous levels of achievement.

In conception 1, generic descriptors do not depict actual achievement levels in any way. The focus of grade descriptors is entirely on credentialling. Grade descriptors are subsequently detached from actual achievement.

In conception 2, grade distributors act as tentative and inadequate depictions of actual achievement. The focus of grade descriptors is on norm-based assessment. Consequently, grade descriptors are classifications of actual achievement.

In conception 3, grade indicators provide primary but incomplete depictions of actual achievement. The focus of grade descriptors is on criterion-based assessment. Grade descriptors in this conception indicate actual achievement.

In conception 4, grade interpreters are primary and comprehensive depictions of actual achievement. The focus of grade descriptors is on standards-based assessment. In this conception, grade descriptors represent actual achievement levels.
Table 1 illustrates the relations between the four conceptions of grade descriptors.

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<td>(a) Structural aspect: the theme of grade descriptors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on credentialling</td>
<td>Focus on norm-based assessment</td>
<td>Focus on criterion-based assessment</td>
<td>Focus on standards-based assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflects generic credentials</td>
<td>Reflects generic credentials</td>
<td>Identifies distribution of achievement levels</td>
<td>Identifies distribution of achievement levels</td>
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<td>(b) Referential aspect: the attributed meaning of grade descriptors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Detached from actual achievement</td>
<td>Classifies actual achievement</td>
<td>Indicates actual achievement</td>
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<td>Does not depict actual achievement</td>
<td>Tentative and inadequate depiction of actual achievement</td>
<td>Primary but incomplete depiction of actual achievement</td>
<td>Primary and comprehensive depiction of actual achievement</td>
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Table 1 illustrates the relations between the four conceptions of grade descriptors.

Discussion

Having set out the critical differences and logical relations between the four conceptions of grade descriptors, we now examine each conception in relation to its underlying purpose of providing a form of standards-based assessment. The defining characteristic of standards-based assessment has been identified as ‘the lucid and unambiguous description of required standards of performance’ (Hawe, 2002, p. 95). The following is a three-fold test of standards-based assessment for grade descriptors adapted from the criteria of Buckles et al. (2001) for standards-based assessment:

(a) as a curricular guide, grade descriptors must inform students what they are expected to learn;
(b) as an assessment guide, grade descriptors must inform students how they should perform in their assessed work;
(c) as an assessment tool, grade descriptors must inform teachers how they can assess whether and to what extent students have learnt.

Table 2 depicts variation in the extent that standards-based assessment is attained by the four conceptions of grade descriptors.
Conception 1. Generic descriptors as a form of standards-based assessment

The conception of grade descriptors as generic descriptors of standards illustrates the explication of standards for the purposes of credentialling. According to Goos and Moni (2001), assigning single grades by using descriptive criteria and standards seems to be at variance with the goal of providing detailed feedback on the many qualities criteria that characterise competent performance. The purposes of credentialling and feedback therefore appear to present conflicting purposes for the usage of grade descriptors. Such a dichotomy creates an artificial distinction between the institution’s standards and the students’ (and the academic’s) understanding of these standards. The conception of grade descriptors as generic descriptors therefore serves a limited purpose in standards-based assessment. Such grade descriptors are conceived as statements of the institution’s generic standards but provide little or no meaning to teachers and students on the requisite standards of performance expected of individual pieces of work. Hence, the conception of grade descriptors as generic descriptors fulfils none of the criteria of Buckles et al. (2001) for standards-based assessment. It does not inform students what to learn (curricular guide) nor the expectations in their assessed work (assessment guide). And it does not inform the academic how they can assess students’ work and to what extent students have learnt (assessment tool).

Conception 2. Grade Distributors as a form of standards-based assessment

Grade distributors are limited to describing a semblance of actual achievement standards. They merely distribute students’ work into different achievement categories without providing any meaningful description of the inherent standards of each student’s work. Grade descriptors are similar to norm-referenced assessment in its premise of comparing achievement standards between students rather than establishing standards to assess students against (Neil & Wadley, 1999; Goos & Moni, 2001).

In terms of the three-fold test of standards-based assessment, grade distributors are not relevant as a curricular guide in informing students what they are expected to learn. Neither does it function as an assessment guide since it does not inform students how they should perform their assessed work. In terms of an assessment tool, grade distributors reflect the same level of utility as norm-referenced assessment as being easy to administer but failing to serve any authentic purpose in assessment (Carlson et al., 2000).

Whilst generic descriptors (conception 1) do not provide any form of descriptions of required standards of performance for students, grade distributors purports to

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Table 2. Variations in conceptions of grade descriptors as standards-based assessment

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<td>(a) Curricular guide</td>
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<td>(b) Assessment guide</td>
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<td>Partial relevance</td>
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<td>(c) Assessment tool</td>
<td>No relevance</td>
<td>Statistical framework</td>
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portray standards as relative descriptions of achievement between students. Its only claim to fulfilling the purpose of standards-based assessment is as an assessment tool for academics to judge students’ work against each other. But since such relative standards cannot be made known to students before they are assessed, grade distributors can only serve a (limited) purpose after students have submitted their work. Hence, grade distributors do not provide students with lucid and unambiguous descriptions of required standards of performance in any way. Their only value is limited to providing academics with a statistical framework to assign relative descriptions of performance standards after the students have submitted their work.

**Conception 3: Grade indicators as a form of standards-based assessment**

Grade indicators seek to provide primary but incomplete descriptions of required standards of performance. Grade indicators are not relevant as a curricular guide since they do not purport to inform students about the academic content they are supposed to learn. However, they are partially relevant as an assessment guide by providing descriptions of performance standards that are indicative to students of how their work may be assessed. They are prevented from serving as complete descriptions of performance standards because they do not depict the full range of desired qualities of students’ work.

As an assessment tool, grade indicators are relevant to academics in providing detailed criteria which indicate the performance standards of students’ work. Grade indicators are only as useful as the assessment criteria they embody. However, it cannot be assumed that teachers and students share the same understanding of assessment criteria (Longhurst, 1997). Higgins *et al.* (2001) warn that students cannot understand assessment criteria because they are often conceived and expressed according to the teacher’s expert discourse. Likewise, Orsmond and Merry (1997) argue that students need subject knowledge as well as understanding of marking criteria in order to understand the requisite expectations of their subject.

Hence, grade indicators provide useful but incomplete descriptions of achievement standards. Whilst they may be useful as an assessment tool for tutors, they cannot claim to be lucid and unambiguous descriptions of performance standards for students.

**Conception 4. Grade interpreters as a form of standards-based assessment**

Grade interpreters seek to provide statements of performance standards by embodying authentic bodies of intrinsic meaning as to what actual achievement levels are. Because there is no discrepancy between standards envisaged before an assignment is given and standards used to assess students, grade interpreters may be said to convey complete and unambiguous descriptions of requisite performance standards.

As a curricular guide, grade interpreters assist students in understanding the precise demands on content for which they will be assessed. As an assessment guide, it informs students as to the specific achievement levels expected of their assessed work. As an assessment tool, it provides academics with a definite and unambiguous source of standards to determine what students have learnt and to what extent.
The ability of grade interpreters to fulfil the criteria for standards-based assessment stems from its focus on standards-referenced assessment. As Hawe (2002) observed, standards-referenced assessment is arguably the closest phenomenon to standards-based assessment. Grade interpreters, by focusing on standards-referenced assessment, represent the practice and understanding of grade descriptors that comes closest to fulfilling the purpose of providing lucid and unambiguous statements of required standards of performance.

Issues for enhancing standards-based assessment

What can be done to enhance the use of grade descriptors as a form of standards-based assessment? It is suggested that three issues must be addressed in order to achieve descriptions of requisite performance standards that are useful to both students and teachers.

The first issue concerns the fitness for purpose of grade descriptors. Academics who decide to utilize grade descriptors should reflect on their underlying agendas and purposes. This paper provides four distinct purposes for grade descriptors and it is submitted that each serves the separate agendas of credentialling, norm-referenced assessment, criterion-referenced assessment and standards-referenced assessment. Agendas for, and purposes of, assessment practices derive from the ‘social values that have meaning and force whenever evaluative judgments and decisions are made’ (Messick, 1995, p. 5). Each purpose of grade descriptors therefore represents a set of values against which assessment standards are referenced. These terms of reference for grade descriptors are epistemological yardsticks which determine its meaning. Many academics have spoken of the confusion between norms, criteria and standards and criterion referencing (Brew et al., 1999; Hawe, 2002). It is suggested that the problem is not only one of conceptual confusion, but also a lack of appreciation and discussion of the different and conflicting agendas of each concept.

Secondly, the issue of underlying discourses and agendas of power behind the fitness of assessment practices must be critically examined. McDowell and Sambell (1999) warn that the process of judging whether an assessment is fit for its purpose is complex and heavily influenced by the power relationships amongst stakeholders. Just like any assessment practice, grade descriptors are vulnerable to the different agendas that influence the assessment process and outcome. Grade descriptors serve different purposes. Hence, the question of whose purpose is ultimately being served must be addressed when using grade descriptors. There is a danger that assessment practices can be used as a mechanism to control students (Houston & Foote, 2001) and grade descriptors cannot be assumed to be immune from such a risk.

Finally, it is suggested that students be involved in the formulation of grade descriptors. Petit and Zawojewski (1990) advocate the involvement of students in setting assessment criteria and argue that it in turn empowers students to evaluate their own performance. Asking students to assess their own coursework might also help to clarify their misunderstandings about the teacher’s assessment criteria (Longhurst, 1997). This is all the more important considering the tendency for different students to have different ideas of what constitutes good or bad work (Adams & King, 1995).
Conclusion

The practice of grade descriptors offers an alternative approach to achieving standards-based assessment by purporting to describe to students and academic staff characteristic work that would merit different grades. However, the results of this study illustrate that academics understand and practise grade descriptors in markedly different ways. These range from conceptualizing grade descriptors as having little or nothing to do with actual standards (conception 1) to understanding grade descriptors as representing actual standards of achievement (conception 4). By making explicit the different ways grade descriptors may be understood by academic staff, this study provides a means of identifying and resolving their different expectations of grade descriptors.

However, the question of whose purpose grade descriptors serve remains the critical one which demands a lucid and unambiguous statement from academics. For the academic, Woolf et al. (1999) argue that statements which differentiate achievement levels should be a process to enhance the academic's understanding of academic standards rather than generate benchmarking statements which specify threshold standards. For the benefit of students, Christie and Stehlik (2002) argue that the only purpose by which any assessment practice should be judged as being fit is to discover if students undertaking a course of study really understand and can apply what they have learnt. By articulating the variations in the purposes and practices of grade descriptors in the form of conceptions, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing efforts to achieve meaningful descriptions of standards that can assist students and teachers in their learning and assessment.

Notes on contributors

Kelvin Tan is an academic staff developer with Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore and a doctoral candidate with the University of Technology, Sydney. His current research focuses on self-assessment, phenomenography and critical perspectives of assessment.

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References

Academics’ conceptions of grade descriptors


Appendix 1. Extract of the Academic Board policy of using grade descriptors

The Academic Board encourages greater use of standards-based assessment, while acknowledging that many faculties and departments will wish to retain norm-based approaches to moderate merit grades. The Academic Board commends the following approach for faculties and departments planning to introduce standards-based assessment:

(a) At unit of study level, identify examples of students’ work that are characteristic of achievement at different merit grades (benchmarks);
(b) Describe the differences between work at different achievement levels in information given to students. Descriptions are likely to be statements such as the following:

At HD level a student demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the unit material, and exhibits initiative and self-reliance in critically evaluating and synthesising ideas related to the unit
(c) Provide students with samples of work at different achievement levels;
(d) Grade assessments and examinations against the benchmarks, discussing the outcomes with colleagues teaching within the unit and in similar units to refine the standards;
(e) Use norm-referenced statistics to moderate the results of standards-based assessment, adhering to any guidelines established by the faculty or department or provided in unit of study descriptions.