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Please cite this paper as:

Alexander, C., & Praeger, S. (2009). *Smoke gets in your eyes: Using rubrics as a tool for building justice into assessment practices.* Paper presented at 'Teacher education crossing borders: Cultures, contexts, communities and curriculum' the annual conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA), Albury, 28 June – 1 July.

Review Status: ☐ Refereed – *Abstract and Full Paper blind peer reviewed.*
 ☒ Non-Refereed – *Abstract Only reviewed.*

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Smoke Gets in Your Eyes:
Using Rubrics as a Tool for building Justice into Assessment Practices

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Abstract
Students are empowered or disempowered by the information that we provide or withhold from them; nowhere is this more significant that in assessment practices (Popham 1997). While some students are able to successfully navigate the nuances of assessment, others see assessment as a bamboozling array of 'smoke and mirrors' designed to shroud achievement in mystery (Martin-Kniep 2000; Weiner 2000). In 2008 the academic staff of the School of Education and Humanities at Christian Heritage College, a private higher-education provider in South-East Queensland, initiated an action research project designed to address the gaps and silences evident in assessment processes in order to encourage justice in and equity of engagement with assessment practices for all students. The aims of this research were to:

- Identify aspects of assessment practices that were not being overtly and openly communicated with students;
- Consider the use of rubrics as an assessment tool to address these gaps, silences and inconsistencies between the declared and actual assessment processes;
- Understand how students engage with rubrics as an assessment tool; and
- Explore the potentialities of using rubrics as a means of leading students towards empowered understanding of assessment practices.

To date, two cycles of action research have been completed (Freebody 2003; Kemmis & McTaggart 1988). The first involved a working party of three full-time lecturing staff; the purpose being to establish the scope of potential action through the undertaking of an audit of practice, a review of literature and the development of recommendations that would structure further action. The second cycle involved five full-time staff in applying the nine recommendations with undergraduate students across all four years of the Bachelor of Education programs. Data was collected from participating lecturers and students across Years 2-4 by the means of email-back questionnaires. Lecturers were asked open-ended questions and the data was analysed by the identification and classification of unique meaning units leading to emergent categories (Glesne 1999; Johnson & Christensen 2004). Students were asked to respond to a yes/no survey questioning the nature of their engagement with the rubrics across six possible processes. This data was collated quantitatively then linked to the students' results for each task. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions and measures of central tendency were used to identify patterns in the data relating to rubric usage and corresponding assessment outcomes (Johnson & Christensen 2004).
The data collected demonstrated that there were differential levels of engagement with rubrics within both the staff and student groups. For students, the data showed that while not using the provided rubrics did not automatically lead to lower levels of achievement, a greater level of engagement with the rubrics did correlate with higher levels of achievement. For lecturing staff, the level of engagement in the use of the recommendations was shown to positively affect the lecturer's impression of the quality of their linguistic clarity in and alignment of teaching and learning with assessment practices.

The findings from the student data shows that there are, broadly speaking, three types of students in relation to assessment practices; the mystified, the intuitive and the empowered. Analysis of the data collected from both staff and students also supports the conclusion that rubric usage does affect learning and assessment outcomes, and that student knowledge of and engagement with rubrics will positively impact results. A process of learning was also evident in the differential processes and practices of lecturing staff as they engaged with creating, teaching about and teaching with rubrics. These findings have led to the initiation of a third cycle of action designed to engage with more lecturing staff, and to investigate what intuitive and empowered students actually do, in order to bring justice to the assessment practices of the mystified.

Introduction
Christian Heritage College (CHC) is a small private higher education institution offering undergraduate and postgraduate courses across four different schools; including the School of Education and Humanities (SEH). Over its 23 years of history, the SEH and the College has developed a profile and role within the Queensland context in teacher education, particularly in relation to the needs of Christian students and schools. While the College can be seen to be serving a niche purpose and clientele, the student body at CHC is diverse and a wide spectrum of denominational, educational and socio-economic backgrounds is represented in the student population. These students report many different reasons for selecting the College. However, a large proportion report selecting CHC because of its Christian focus and ethos, smaller class sizes and personalised attention. Each year, a significant proportion of the student body is made up of students who are in need of specialised assistance in order to facilitate their engagement in the practices of academic discourses (Hyland, 2009).

As a result, the College has established a range of processes and interventions that are used to build bridges between where students are at and where they need to be in terms of the procedures and practices of an academic learning environment. These processes and interventions have included activities such as standardised testing and the reporting of strengths and weaknesses to individuals, the provision of additional and specialised tutorials and workshops, personalised coaching and mentoring, facilitating self-regulated 'study-help' groups, tutoring and maximising opportunities to submit, review and resubmit assessment. Over time these actions have been shown to be foundational to establishing the success of students in their first year at CHC. For most students these types of experiences in their first year at the College establishes a pattern of social interaction and engagement in the learning community that becomes self regulated and the reliance on the support practices wanes over subsequent semesters.

There are, however, some students who carry their difficulties and problems into subsequent years. Often, these students have attained academic results that are disparate, and their performance in various assessment tasks and units are variable and unpredictable. Yet these students will usually also have a keen desire to succeed and to find ways to engage in academic learning. Ruth is one such student.

Ruth is a keen young student who is enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Education(Secondary/MiddleYears) program, she hopes to become a high school Drama and English teacher. Ruth is now in her early twenties and entered College as a school leaver. She is currently in her fourth year of study. While Ruth started well in her first semester, gaining a grade point average of 5.4, however, her performance since this time has been variable with her worst semester being resulting in a grade point average of just 3.4. Over her program so far, Ruth's results have included two 'High Distinction' and six 'Fail' and an even spread of everything in

between. While there have been a range of personal issues that have impacted upon Ruth's performance across different semesters, it has been the enormous variation of results both within and between semesters that has been a point of concern. While some lecturers describe Ruth as an engaging and academically capable student, others have expressed a concern that she appears to be 'functionally illiterate' in relation to the specific assessment tasks she has completed for their units.

Ruth and other students like her have played an important role in the development of this investigation into assessment practices. Their pattern of variable engagement and achievement has demonstrated the presence of a gap or miscommunication in relation to the expectations and requirements of the academic discourses used in assessment. As such, finding ways to engage these types of students effectively in academic discourses without compromising academic rigour became the focus of professional conversations amongst the faculty. Concerns were raised about the 'smoke and mirrors' that were evident in the ways that both individual lecturers and the faculty as a community approached assessment practices. In particular, issues of equity and justice were discussed in relation to the impact of the variation and divergence evident in the communication of assessment requirements and expectations. From these conversations, the use of rubrics as a tool for facilitating the clear and explicit declaration of assessment requirements and expectations was identified as a potential means by which just and equitable communication might occur. It was hoped that rubrics would assist students like Ruth to unravel the mysteries of assessment and achievement and develop some consistency in their performances across a wider range of tasks and discourses.

Investigating the Nature, Role and Purposes of Rubrics

he use of the term 'rubric' as a noun began in the middle ages when it was used to describe various uses of red ink, such as the large elaborate red letters that monks created to differentiate each new section of a text (Popham 1997, ¶ 8). This word usage originated from the word 'ruber' which signified the red earth, and the original meaning was to 'adorn with red' or to be 'marked with red'. The use of the term in educational contexts began as a way to refer to the 'red' notes that teachers make on a student's work, though in recent years its use has been narrowed to represent a very specific type of scoring tool (Wikipedia 2008, ¶ 11).

A rubric is a teaching tool designed to clearly describe the characteristics and qualities of a specific learning or assessment task. They are most commonly used as a means of assessing the quality of students' work, though they can also be used as an instructional tool in helping students to understand the requirements of the task (Andrade 2000, p. 13). Montgomery (2000, p. 325) defines them as, 'an assessment tool that uses clearly specified evaluation criteria and proficiency levels to gauge student achievement of those criteria.' Rubrics are always distinguished from other tools used for assessing student work by the provision of actual descriptions of the desirable qualities or standards of work for the set criteria.

As such, the foundational purpose of a rubric as a scoring tool is to facilitate understandings of the requirements of and guide judgements made about the quality of particular tasks. As Lund (2006, p.13) states, 'good rubrics should paint verbal pictures of program expectations.' Montgomery (2002) notes that rubrics are being used as scoring tools to:
- Help instructors define the precise criteria and standards for success in the assessment task prior to the completion of the task,
- Establish criteria prior to instruction so that teachers can focus on critical elements of the curriculum thus ensuring alignment of curriculum content, instruction and assessment, and

- Give feedback to students in such a way that they may achieve success on similar tasks in the future.

Rubrics should be designed to assist students in the process of creating assessment demonstrations and teachers in the process of providing informative and timely feedback.

While rubrics were originally designed to facilitate assessment processes and purposes, their potential for facilitating instructional purposes has become the core of much of the recent literature (Andrade 2005; Lund 2006; Montgomery 2002). The instructional purposes of a rubric relate to their use with students as a means of improving performance. The instructional purposes of rubrics are facilitated by activities such as; providing and explaining the rubrics to students when tasks are being explained, having students use the rubrics to assess examples of various qualities, co-creating rubrics with students, and requiring students to use the rubrics to self-assess their work (Andrade 2005, p. 29). Rubrics help teachers to unpack assessment processes and products in order to scaffold student understanding of and achievement in a particular task. In this way, rubrics can become a foundational asset in the pedagogical processes of modelled and guided practice, and have the potential to make a positive contribution to students' transformed practice. There is significant evidence that, 'high levels of rubric use lead to increased academic performance scores' (Loveland 2005, p. 22), though this increase is also dependent upon the quality of the rubrics being used. As Popham (1997, ¶ 36) states, 'appropriately designed rubrics can make an enormous contribution to instructional quality'.

The benefits of using rubrics are multi-faceted and closely aligned to the purposes for which they are being used. That is, there are benefits for both teachers and students in using rubrics as an assessment tool, but, these benefits are added to when rubrics are also used as instructional tools. The overt benefits of developing assessment and instructional uses for rubrics include the provision of:
- Clear guidelines and expectations for each of the passing grades (Loveland 2005, p. 22),
- Resources to facilitate self assessment leading to self-correction prior to submission (Andrade 2008),
- A means to identify areas for improvement (Montgomery 2002, p. 36), and
- Cogent feedback that explains and justifies the grade received (Andrade 2005, p. 29).

However, a review of the literature has shown that the most powerful benefit of rubric use for students relates to the shift in the locus of control over assessment. Weiner's attributional approach to motivation identifies and describes the intersection of the attribution of success or failure over the issues of the 'locus of control', the 'stability of causes' and the 'controllability of causes' (Lefrancois 2000, p. 427; Weiner 2000, p. 4). These three factors intersect in a 'three-dimensional causal space' within which the causes of success or failure attributed by an individual can be mapped (Weiner 2000, p. 5). The use of rubrics in teaching and learning has the potential to positively influence students' attributions of success or failure by removing the 'mystery' of how assessment is graded and providing clear directions for improving performance that are within the students' control (Martin-Kniep 2000, p. 41). The 'locus of control' of success or failure is shifted away from the teacher, who controls and make 'hidden' calculations about grades, to the students, who design demonstrations based on the information provided in the rubric.

Methodology
In seeking to investigate the faculties' practices in relation to the use of rubrics in teaching, learning and assessment, action research was the methodology of choice because of its ability to combine action with research to inevitably challenge the status quo (Somekh & Zeicher 2009, p. 19). The action research methods enabled the researchers to work together to gather data around the issue as

well as draw in a group of practitioners to work together to develop knowledge, develop a critical awareness of the issues at hand, and refine practice to address the gaps and silences evident in assessment processes in order to encourage justice in and equity of engagement with assessment practices for all students (Zeni 2001). The cyclical approach to investigation espoused by action research allowed for an introductory cycle which focussed on developing understanding and a subsequent cycle which promoted change. Robertson notes, 'There can be action research for specific purposes, action research for action purposes and action research communities that can lead to emancipatory practices in education' (2000, p. 324). The aims of this research project aligned with the purposes outlined by Robertson (2000).

The research undertaken in the SEH fulfilled these purposes in the following ways:

1. *Action research for specific purposes* – Identified aspects of assessment practices that were not being overtly and openly communicated with students; Understood how students engaged with rubrics as an assessment tool;
2. *Action research for action purposes* – Considered the use of rubrics as an assessment tool to address the gaps, silences and inconsistencies between declared and actual assessment processes; and
3. *Action research communities that can lead to emancipatory practices in education* – Explored the potentialities of using rubrics as a means of leading students towards empowered understanding of assessment practices.

Phase one of the action research involved a working party of three full-time lecturing staff from the SEH who worked together to establish the scope of potential action through the undertaking of an audit of practice, a review of literature and the development of recommendations that would structure further action. The findings of these activities were then presented to the seven full-time and two part-time SEH staff members in the form of a discussion paper and a set of nine recommendations. Robust discussion regarding these findings was facilitated by a workshop session where in-principle agreement to implement the recommendations was reached.

Phase two of the action research involved seven full-time staff who applied the nine recommendations with undergraduate students across Years 1-4 of the preservice Bachelor of Education programs at CHC. The part-time staff members were unable to commit to the study at the time.

Data was collected from participating lecturers and students across Years 2-4 by the means of email-back questionnaires. This mode of data collection was chosen firstly because of the minimal costs involved in production and distribution of the questionnaires, and also because the data would be received in a format which did not require transcription. It was also thought that students would respond more readily to an electronic format. This proved to be correct with one class sending in 11 responses (out of a total of 13 responses received from the class) within 4 hours of the instrument being sent out.

Lecturers were requested to respond to open-ended questions about the use of rubrics with their classes. Six full-time staff members responded to the questionnaire and one full-time staff member did not respond. The qualitative data was analysed by the identification and classification of unique meaning units leading to emergent categories (Glesne 1999; Johnson & Christensen 2004).

The students were asked to respond to a yes/no survey, questioning the nature of their engagement with the rubrics across six possible processes. The survey was emailed to students by three lecturers explaining the purposes for collecting information and promising anonymity to participants. If they agreed to being involved in the study they were asked to send their responses to

the survey to their lecturer. This data was collated quantitatively, linked to the students' results for each task and then stripped of all identifying information. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions and measures of central tendency were then used to identify patterns in the data relating to rubric usage and corresponding assessment outcomes (Johnson & Christensen 2004).

Findings

During phase one of the project, two activities contributed significantly to the findings reported to all full and fractional time lecturing staff through the 'discussion paper' and workshop session. These were the audit of practice and the literature review.

The audit of practice involved the collection of rubrics which were already being used by full-time lecturing staff in the SEH. This revealed that two significantly different models for the specification of criteria were being used in the SEH. While some units had rubrics based on a 'curricular intentions' model using the 'Exit Criteria' as identified in the accredited unit outline as the criteria for the rubric; other units had rubrics based on a 'task-specific' model where the nature of the tasks and the 'Exit Criteria' are mutually unpacked into a set of 'enabling criteria' specific to each assessment task. The first model results in a single rubric for use with all assessment tasks in a unit, and the second results in a unique rubric for each task. Variations were also evident in; the specificity of the criteria, the labelling of the standards, the development of the language of the standards descriptors, the number of standards considered to be passing grades, the conversion of assessment grades to overall grades for a unit, formatting and page orientation.

The review of literature around the use and construction of rubrics elicited information on different types of rubrics and their use both as tools for assessment and teaching. The following model was developed to describe and differentiate between different types of rubrics.

		Gradations of Quality	
		Mid-Range Descriptors	Benchmark Descriptors
Specific Criteria	Curricular Intentions	Criteria: 'unit outcomes' or 'exit criteria' Qualities: one for each standard	Criteria: 'unit outcomes' or 'exit criteria' Qualities: benchmarks established on continuum
	Task-Specific	Criteria: relate to the task Qualities: one for each standard	Criteria: relate to the task Qualities: benchmarks established on continuum

Figure 1. Differentiating models of rubrics.

The information gathered through the audit of practice and literature review contributed to the development of nine recommendations about the use of rubrics in the SEH. The scope and nature of the recommendations were designed to facilitate the development of comparable practices between lecturing staff in relation to the use and development of rubrics for teaching and assessment. The purpose of the recommendations was to promote and facilitate predictable, comprehensible and equitable communication with all students across all units. After considerable discussion and negotiation, the recommendations were articulated as follows:

1. Common language will be used when labelling and describing rubrics.
2. Rubrics will be developed for all assessment tasks.
3. All rubrics will be overtly linked to the unit outline.
4. All rubrics will have four passing standards to line up with the four passing exit grades.
5. Common verbal standard names will be used to label the five standards and these should not be abbreviated in the reporting of overall results on a task. The standards shall be: Outstanding, High Quality, Commendable, Satisfactory and Unsatisfactory.
6. All rubrics will include standard descriptors that describe mid-range expectations.

7. All criteria on a rubric will be assumed to be equally weighted unless otherwise indicated and approved.
8. Qualitative judgements based on the assigned weightings and the evidence provided in students' performances, rather than quantitative calculations, will be used in the allocation of overall results for an assessment task.
9. All rubrics will be tabulated with the description of the highest performance on the left and a clear demarcation between the passing and failing standards descriptors.

At the conclusion of phase one of the project, the negotiated recommendations were approved by all staff present at the workshop and agreement was reached about the continuation of the project into a second phase. All full-time staff agreed to implement the recommendations and provide data relating to this implementation at the conclusion of the following semester. However, the data collected from lecturing staff paints a picture of variable engagement with the nine recommendations.

Four of the six lecturers who submitted the questionnaire reported implementing the full nine recommendations in at least one unit in the semester, while the other two listed aspects they found challenging or had 'forgotten' to implement. Having said that, all of the lecturers involved were positive in their attitude towards the potential of rubrics to make a difference in the assessment beliefs and practices of students. One lecturer stated that, *'the rubric has facilitated the level at which these tasks should be engaged'*. Another reported that she *'felt that the students had a greater understanding of what was expected in the assessment tasks as a result of using the rubrics'*.

All of the lecturers involved in the project also reported a wide range of teaching and learning tasks and activities that they had undertaken with students in relation to the rubrics that they had developed. The range of activities undertaken were categorised into three broad actions; namely constructing rubrics, unpacking rubrics, and providing feedback to students. This showed that the lecturers were using the rubrics for both instructional and scoring purposes, though there was variation in the depth and level of engagement in the unpacking processes. While some lecturers, *'referred to the task specific rubric criteria when "unpacking" the assessment task'*, others actually undertook, *'tutorial activities unpacking them'* with the students.

There were also a number of challenges that the lecturers described in relation to the development and use of the rubrics with students. Most of these were connected to issues of alignment and linguistic clarity. Alignment was shown to be useful in facilitating the coverage of unit requirements, guiding teaching and learning and developing evidence trails from exit criteria to assessment tasks. The lecturers clearly described the significance of the process of aligning the rubric criteria with the content and requirements of the unit. This alignment was described as an *'essential tool for effectively evidencing learning with this unit'*.

This alignment, however, created significant challenges for lecturers; particularly in relation to linguistic clarity. Linguistic clarity is foundational to the usefulness of a rubric to the learners; the language used in creating the rubric must be clear to the learner and build appropriate bridges between the learner and the academic discourse relevant to the task. In the development and use of rubrics, the lecturers described the process of ensuring linguistic clarity as the most challenging component of the process. One lecturer noted that their challenge lay in developing, *'sub-criteria and unpacking of a given criteria in a manner that enhances evidence of quality learning outcomes'*. While another more specifically described the challenge of, *'trying to create descriptors for each criterion within each standard which aren't simply based on semantics (i.e. the*

changing of one or two adjectives) but truly reflect the changing nature of each (decreasing) standard'.

Achieving linguistic clarity in the development of a rubric is foundational to facilitating student engagement and success with them. As one student noted, in an additional comment submitted with the survey, *'The reason I don't is that in the early days when looking at rubrics, I found them so unclear, it only confused the question or task for me'*. It was therefore important to collect data from students in relation to units were the lecturing staff felt confident about the quality of the rubrics and their adherence to the recommendations. The three units selected involved the four lecturing staff who reported that they had implemented all of the recommendations.

The students were asked to identify which, if any, of six processes they had undertaken as they prepared their assessment demonstrations for the various tasks in the selected units. The six processes were:

- Reading the rubric prior to starting,
- Analysing the rubric prior to starting,
- Talking about the rubric with other students,
- Questioning the lecturer about the rubric,
- Reviewing the rubric while completing the task, and
- Self-assessing the task against the rubric in order to make improvements.

The number of these processes that each student undertook, for each assignment they reported on, was then counted. This showed differential levels of engagement with the rubrics across the surveyed student body, and a fairly even spread with almost as many students using all six processes as there was using none of them. Table 1 shows the spread of student engagement with the processes as a percentage of the responses received.

Table 1. Rubric usage as reported by students.

The number of processes reported:	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Percentage of students reporting this level of engagement:	12%	13%	18%	18%	16%	14%	9%

This data about students' rubric usage was then correlated to the results achieved on each assessment task. From this analysis, an interesting pattern emerged in relation to the level of engagement with the rubrics for a particular task and the results achieved on that task. It was observed that rubric usage declined as achievement declined, but, a failure to engage with the rubrics did not preclude a high level of achievement.   Table 2 illustrates this point by comparing the reported engagement with the rubrics for those students who received an 'Unsatisfactory' result with the reported engagement of those who received an 'Outstanding' result for the relevant task.

*Table 2. Assessment achievement compared to the level of reported rubric usage.*

The number of processes reported:	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
% of students who received 'Unsatisfactory' - equivalent to a Fail	75%	25%	-	-	-	-	-
% of students who received 'Outstanding' - equivalent to a High Distinction	6%	6%	22%	6%	17%	28%	17%

When this data was then analysed for all levels of attainment to find the mean level of rubric usage, the pattern of decline became clearer. Figure 2 describes this decline in rubric usage as the level of achievement declines.
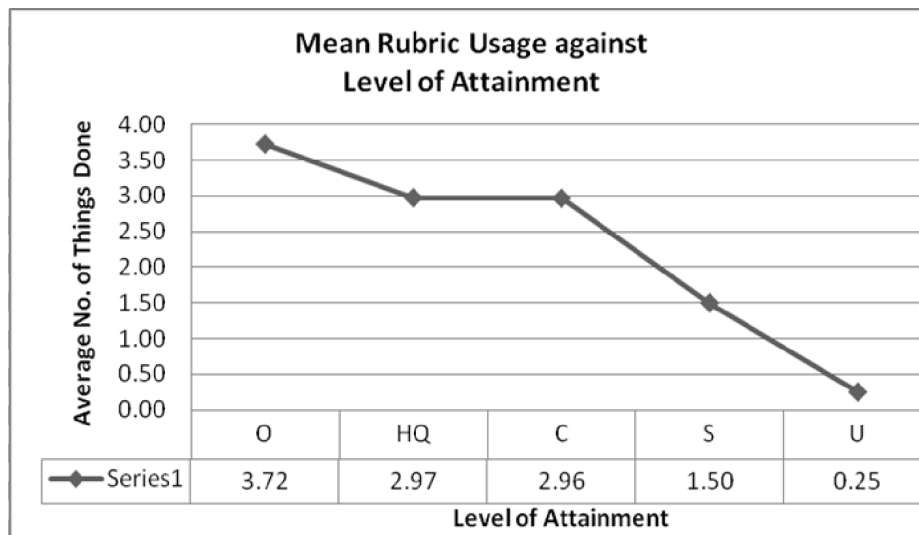
Figure 2. Mean rubric usage against level of attainment.

Having identified these two patterns, questions surfaced about a range of variables that might be influencing the data. Of particular concern was the potential for the skills and abilities of individual students to influence these results. In order to remove the influence of this variable, it was necessary to look at the data about the two different assessment tasks that had been collected from each individual student. When this was done, it was noted that while more students maintained the same level of rubric usage for both tasks, around 44% of students reported different levels of engagement with the rubrics for the different assignments. When the data was rearranged to separate these two groups of students, those for who had maintained the level of rubric usage and those who had made changes, some other interesting pattern was observed. Firstly, of the students who had made changes to their engagement with the rubrics, about half of them (48%) had increased their usage for the second task while the other half had decreased their usage. This effectively meant that the influence of variables such as the complexity of the task and the timing in the semester had been moderated also. Secondly, a correlation between a higher level of engagement with the rubrics and a higher level of achievement was observed. In contrast, the results of those students who maintained the same level of rubric usage were split fairly evenly between improving, maintaining and declining levels of attainment. Figure 3 shows proportionally how the results of students improved, were maintained or declined when the student increased their level of engagement with the relevant rubric.
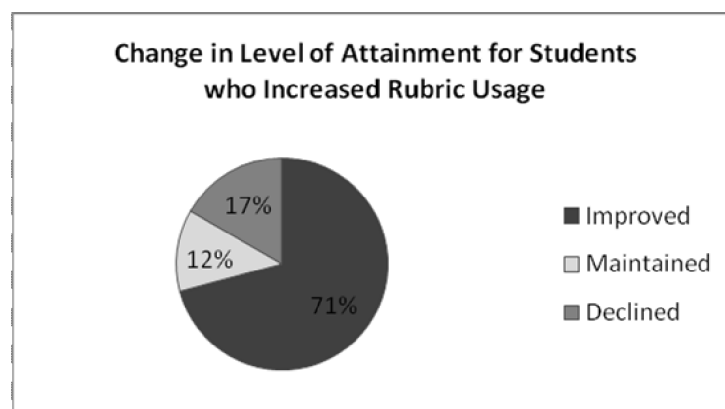
Figure 3. Change in attainment after increasing rubric usage.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As a result of engaging in the process of analysing the data collected from both staff and students, three pivotal outcomes emerged. These related to the development of staff competencies in

developing and using rubrics; the presence, broadly speaking, of three distinct groups of students in terms of their rubric usage; and the students' development towards understanding, using and developing rubrics.

Firstly, the differential engagement of lecturers with the development and use of rubrics in line with the nine recommendations was dependent on individual understandings, available time and confidence. The lecturers who had been involved in the development of the first phase of the project were able to engage in the second phase in a much more consistent fashion and were able to facilitate the collection of data from students. However, the staff who were introduced to the project and the recommendations through the workshop at the conclusion of the first phase, contributed significantly to understanding the processes involved in lecturers engaging with rubrics. As with many innovations, the development of lecturers' competencies in the development and use of rubrics was shown to be incremental. In the context of the second phase of this project, three key features of this development emerged; these were the lecturers' competencies in creating, teaching about and teaching with rubrics. Professional discussions of and development in all three of these aspects of lecturers' use of rubrics were shown to be needed if the benefits of rubrics as both scoring and instructional tools were going to be attained. Furthermore, it was also shown that the issue of linguistic clarity was foundational to success in this development. The lecturer's ability to clearly describe the requirements of the task in the language of both the criteria and standards was shown to be foundational to the usefulness of the rubrics in the process of scaffolding teaching, learning and assessment. Figure 4 is a model that has been developed out of the data to describe the process of linguistic clarity that is required to maximise engagement with the relevant academic discourses.
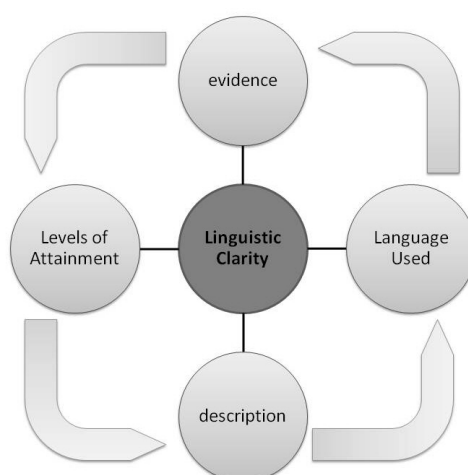

Figure 4. Linguistic clarity.

Secondly, throughout both the initial discussions that prompted this research and the data that was gathered from staff in phase two of the project there was an assumption evident in the ways that student potential and performance was categorised. Overwhelmingly, lecturing staff talked about two categories of student; those who were *'mystified'* or *'failed to appreciate assessment practices and processes'* and those who *'understand the process from exit criteria to task'*. However, the data that was gathered from the students did not support this assumption. Rather, the data shows that there are in fact three broad categories of students; namely, the mystified, the intuitive and the empowered students. The mystified students are those who are unaware of the processes of assessment practices in relation to the use of rubrics; these are the students who did not engage with the rubrics and consequently did not successfully complete the assessment tasks. The intuitive students, on the other hand, were able to successfully complete the assessment task, but not because of their ability to engage with the rubric; somehow these students are able to identify the key

requirements of a task from the description of the task alone. The empowered students are those students who are able to successfully complete the assessment tasks and are able to use the rubrics as a tool to assist them in ensuring that the task is fulfilling the requirements.

Thirdly, in the context of a teacher education course, the process of developing students' awareness and understanding of the assessment practices and principles that underpin the development and use of rubrics was highlighted. Just as the lecturing staff were shown to be on a professional journey in relation to rubrics, so too were the students. From investigating the practices of students across Years 2-4 it was shown that the benefit for the student began with their own learning but would influence their teaching also.

Having completed the second phase, it was important to bring these outcomes to bear on the original purposes of the project and to consider the potential impact that this might have on students like Ruth. In doing so, it is apparent that the aims of the project have been served by the first two phases. Firstly, the audit of practice has identified a number of areas of concern in terms of the communication of assessment processes and practices and the development of the nine recommendations has led to more open and consistent communication across the lecturing staff involved. Secondly, a deeper and more diverse picture of student engagement with assessment tasks and the potential of the rubrics as a means of empowering students has emerged. Finally, significant understandings of the processes of developing and using rubrics as scoring and instructional tools designed to scaffold engagement in relevant academic discourse have developed (Hyland 2009).

These understandings have strengthened the argument for continued action and research in this area. Some of the unanswered questions worthy of further investigation include:
- How do the 'empowered' students use rubrics to help in the assessment process?
- How do the 'intuitive' students know what to do when given an assignment?
- What things are preventing the 'mystified' students from engaging with the rubrics?
- What processes facilitate linguistic clarity in the development and use of rubrics?

These questions have become the focus of the third phase in this project and have strengthened the focus of the research on the potential of rubrics to facilitate just assessment practices that are within the reach of all students.

But, what about Ruth? Ruth did not contribute to the student data. She had failed at least one of the relevant assessment tasks and mentioned in passing that she didn't know what to do with the rubrics so hadn't answered the questionnaire. Ruth was then invited to participate in an individual study session to discuss the processes of assessment and how to unpack a rubric as a means of understanding an assessment task. Ruth accepted the offer, engaged in the intervention and has applied her new learnings to subsequent assessment tasks. This semester Ruth is consistently performing at a 'Credit' level or better and is on track to record her best grade point average for a semester's work.

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