

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**A students-as-partners-inspired approach to assessment rubric design**

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## ABSTRACT

The global popularity of the students-as-partners (SaP) model in the higher education sector demonstrates that students, through their lived experiences, have valuable perspectives to contribute to shaping university curricular and co-curricular experiences. While there are numerous inherent benefits associated with facilitating SaP arrangements, incorporating such practices to influence curricular change can be difficult in highly regulated and accredited courses. This article presents a successfully trialled SaP-inspired model involving assessment rubric design in the Bachelor of Laws degree offered at Curtin University in Australia, which is subject to multiple layers of regulation at national and state levels by public and private bodies. The SaP-inspired model presented in the paper is a useful starting point for academics wanting to engage in SaP co-creation of curricular initiatives in contexts that are not especially conducive to SaP, for example, heavily regulated and accredited courses. This article further contributes to existing SaP literature as it presents qualitative and quantitative data collected from the students who engaged in the SaP-inspired model, as well as data collected from students who experienced the SaP-inspired outputs first hand. This article commences with a student reflection on the SaP-inspired model, written by Ryan Kirby who participated in the workshop and assisted in the creation of the assessment rubric and supplementary materials.

## KEYWORDS

students as partners, higher education, assessment rubric design

The concept of students-as-partners (SaP) in higher education is not novel; it has been labelled the “current global tertiary trend” (Milburn & Jones, 2019, p. 65). Over the last 10 years, universities around the world have begun to actively engage in student-staff partnership initiatives with the goal of enhancing the higher education experiences of students. While there is no shortage of literature that outlines the benefits and opportunities that flow from SaP initiatives, the literature also acknowledges the difficulties and challenges that staff and students face when engaging in SaP practices (e.g., Bovill et al., 2016). Most notably, given that the majority of courses offered through universities are subject to professional accreditation, facilitating authentic opportunities for students to be co-creators of their curriculum can prove to be difficult due to onerous compliance requirements. For example, in Australia, the Bachelor of Laws (LLB) is subject

to multifaceted layers of regulation at national and state levels by both public and private bodies. Consequently, there is generally very little scope for curricular variation and influence within regulated and accredited disciplines and courses, such as law.

This article analyses an assessment rubric design model that was inspired by SaP ideologies and practices. This approach was a response to the desire a student expressed in a focus group to be involved in the process: “I would like to be consulted [in the assessment rubric design process]. I believe the student experience can be enhanced with collaboration with markers and unit coordinators.” Subsequently, this SaP-inspired model was developed and conducted within the Curtin Law School, Faculty of Business and Law at Curtin University in 2023. As part of the project, penultimate- and final-year law students were asked to engage in a voluntary workshop to assist in the design of an assessment rubric for a first-year law unit titled LAWS1005 Legal Foundations (LAWS1005). In the SaP-inspired workshop, the students worked in partnership with the academic facilitator to redesign the rubric for an assessment within the unit. The SaP-inspired designed assessment rubric, along with additional supplementary resources, was implemented in Semester 1, 2023. Students enrolled in the unit were asked to complete a questionnaire at the end of the study period, outlining their experience of using the SaP-inspired designed assessment rubric.

This article commences with a reflection written by Ryan Kirby, a student partner involved in the project. The discussion of this project is first situated in a broader discussion of the critical role of assessment rubrics in the higher education landscape and how assessment rubrics present a logical space to incorporate SaP practices (particularly in courses and disciplines that are regulated and/or accredited, with prescribed content and standards set by professional or accrediting bodies). The article then details the steps of the SaP-inspired model involving assessment rubric design and the qualitative and quantitative questionnaire data collected from the students who were the direct recipients of the project’s outputs. On the spectrum of SaP work, the model presented in this article reflects a useful starting point for academics wanting to engage in the SaP co-creation of curricular space in contexts that are not especially conducive to SaP involvement in curriculum development, such as heavily regulated disciplines and courses. However, to move towards more authentic SaP practices, student involvement should be incorporated earlier in curricular design and should go beyond involvement in a one-off workshop.

While academic literature on SaP theories and practices has increased, research assessing the perspectives of students and staff not directly engaged in the SaP process appears to be under-represented (Gravett et al., 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). In particular, the views of students who experience the outputs derived from SaP approaches but who are not directly involved in the partnership are not well documented. This article seeks to fill this gap by analysing and disseminating the qualitative and quantitative data collected as a part of the project from the students who experienced the SaP-inspired outputs first hand but were not involved in the process.

## STUDENT REFLECTION BY RYAN KIRBY

This undertaking by the project team sought to rework and challenge traditional structures of regulation with respect to assessment policy within the higher education environment. While these top-down regulations and regimented policies are normative in university institutions, students often perceive these conventional approaches as falling short in promoting students' interests and fostering their critical engagement with both discipline content and assessments.

The SaP workshop facilitated by the project team ensured that a wide array of diverse student perspectives were actively solicited. The workshop involved aspects of design thinking and radical collaboration, and suggestions made by SaP participants were incorporated in real time to encourage robust discussion and feedback. This structure allowed for equal and democratic input—nobody got all that they wanted, but nobody got nothing. The redesign of an assessment rubric in collaboration with engaged and active students had distinct merit as it enhanced student engagement with the course material, incorporated student input in assessment design, and in turn improved student receptivity, promoted student empowerment, and championed diversity.

The underlying objective of the SaP initiative was to boost the utility to students of the assessment rubric, acknowledging that the existing rubric required improvement. With this objective in mind, the student partners suggested exemplars for each of the assessment rubric descriptors and a marked-up of the assessment rubric (including grade and feedback) for each of the corresponding exemplars. The key benefit of this approach was that students not only received exemplars of the assessment they were completing, but also examples of the assessment rubric marked-up in relation to exemplars. From personal experience, I can say that traditional assessment rubric structures tend to be too broad and are often hard to apply to course material and assessments.

I believe that SaP-inspired approaches to designing assessment rubrics not only modernise assessment rubrics, but also aid in the transition of students who are entering higher education from secondary education. The application of colour across the levels of mastery, the provision of exemplar descriptors, and the addition of video exemplars illustrating the assessment rubric in practice are simple changes that have modernised the traditional assessment rubric. These factors culminated to promote a positive redesign that not only boosted student engagement with the assessment rubric, but also likely promoted student receptivity to the assessment task.

This SaP initiative sought to empower students to influence change in the realm of academic assessment policy to make a meaningful impact, be bold, make radical suggestions, and ultimately to promote student outcomes. I am of the strong conviction that the resultant assessment rubric stands as a testament of innovation and a step toward a genuine SaP orientation.

## DEVELOPING ASSESSMENT RUBRICS: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR A SAP APPROACH

In regulated and accredited disciplines, SaP opportunities for co-creation of curriculum, although difficult, are possible with respect to how students learn, demonstrate, and achieve the course outcomes and prescribed standards (Bovill et al., 2016; Hutchings et al., 2011). The SaP-inspired model we present is an example of a process involving assessment rubric design that has been

successfully trialled in a regulated discipline. Taking a SaP-inspired approach to assessment rubrics design is practical, as assessment rubrics are an important aspect of student learning but do not tend to be the subject of regulation.

In higher education, assessment rubrics are primarily used by academic staff as a tool to assess and measure student learning and performance against assigned assessment criteria (e.g., Finn et al., 2022; de Boer et al., 2021; Moskal & Leydens, 2000) and to provide feedback to students. However, given the versatility of assessment rubrics, academics have recently extended their use beyond just assessment marking and have begun using assessment rubrics as a tool to improve student performance and support metacognitive skills development through reflective tasks (Barker & Rozendal, 2019; Andrade et al., 2009). Assessment rubrics are generally used by students in two ways: first, as a reference source as to how to complete the assessment task with respect to the prescribed criteria that is being assessed, and second, once the assessment task has been graded, as a reference point for feedback on how they performed with respect to the prescribed criteria (Finn et al., 2022).

The importance and benefits of providing quality assessment feedback is well established in academic research and literature (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). Effective assessment feedback can assist students to develop “deep learning” (Biggs, 1999) as it not only provides students with an understanding of how they performed in the assessment but is also an opportunity for students to develop and improve with respect to the task and skills being assessed. Higgins et al. (2002) also suggests that, beyond improving learning, assessment feedback received by students in the course of their studies influences the overall quality of their student experience.

In order to get the most out of an assessment task, the feedback must “connect” with students (Higgins et al., 2002). Given that feedback is often provided once the assessment task has been completed, research has emphasised the importance of ensuring that the assessment criteria and evaluation standards upon which student work will be marked are clearly explained prior to students commencing the assessment (Hounsell, 1987; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). Unfortunately, one of the commonly reported student criticisms of feedback is that it is difficult to interpret the comments provided (Chanock, 2000), as a result it is vital that the criteria descriptors of an assessment rubric can be easily understood by students and the scale conveying the levels of performance can be differentiated.

The creation of an open dialogue between academics and students to improve feedback literacy has been explored by Matthews et al. (2024) who highlight the importance of “effective learner-teacher partnership in assessment and feedback” (p. 11). This work sheds light on student and staff perceptions and perspectives with respect to feedback. Similarly, the SaP-inspired model presented in this article provides an example of a collaboration between students and staff with the common goal to improve feedback literacy through the creation of assessment rubrics that are not only academically rigorous, but can also be easily understood by students.

## PROJECT METHOD

The SaP-inspired project undertaken in LAWS1005 was comprised of two components:

- Project 1: A SaP-inspired model involving assessment rubric design and
- Project 2: A questionnaire surveying the students who experienced the SaP-inspired outputs first hand.

Given the nature of the project, institutional human ethics approval was obtained (Curtin University Human Research Ethics Office approval number: HRE2021-0649). All students involved in the two components of the project were provided a Participant Information Form and formally gave their consent to participate in the project.

### **Project 1: A SaP-inspired model involving assessment rubric design**

#### *Purpose*

The underling objective of the project was to create an assessment rubric exemplar that was informed by research and best practice and that included student perspectives. To achieve this purpose, the objective of the first component of the project was to work with experienced students in a SaP-inspired arrangement to create an effective assessment rubric that could be easily understood by first-year students.

#### *Participants*

For the purposes of the project, penultimate- and final-year Curtin law students were asked to engage in a voluntary workshop to assist in the assessment rubric design of a first-year Bachelor of Law unit, LAWS1005. The rationale for inviting penultimate- and final-year law students was because these students would be familiar with the unit's learning outcomes and assessments, having completed it in their first year of their law studies.

An expression of interest was made via email mailout and shared on social media platforms, inviting penultimate- and final-year law students to participate in the 2-hour workshop to review and design an assessment rubric for a LAWS1005 assessment. Five students (four law students and one faculty student representative) attended and participated in the workshop conducted in January 2023.

#### *Research method*

The method employed for this component of the project was a workshop that facilitated open dialogue with participants. The workshop was semi-structured and comprised of open-ended questions so that participants could provide detailed responses. The rationale for not formally structuring the workshop was to create a relaxed environment where participants felt they could voice their opinions and feedback openly and freely (Choong, 2017).

A critical aspect of the SaP-inspired workshop was creating a safe environment, guided by the SaP essential principles of "respect, reciprocity, and responsibility" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 2). Careful consideration of the power discrepancy between the academic facilitator and participants was acknowledged and addressed (Dianati & Oberhollenzer, 2020). By building teacher immediacy, i.e. establishing perceived psychological closeness through verbal and non-verbal behaviours, between the facilitator and participants (LeFebvre & Allen, 2014), a relaxed

environment was formed where participants felt comfortable and motivated to contribute their ideas, as indicated in Kirby's student reflection.

The overarching purpose of the project was explained to participants at the beginning of the workshop, including a brief explanation of SaP practices and purpose. To provide the participants with the broader context of the project, Bigg's principle of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011) was explained, as well as Curtin University's Graduate Capabilities, the LLB course learning outcomes, and specifically the LAWS1005 unit learning outcomes. Finally, the assessment task that the assessment rubric was being designed for, LAWS1005 Assessment 1: Oral Presentation, was explained to students. The assessment instructions were discussed, the existing assessment rubric was displayed, and an explanation was provided of what students needed to demonstrate to achieve the various levels of mastery specified in the assessment rubric. It was important that participants had this broader contextual understanding of the assessment task so that they could contribute meaningfully to the design of the assessment rubric.

Once the participants had the contextual understanding of the purpose of the project, the assessment rubric was displayed on the screens within the teaching space, and an open dialogue between the academic facilitator and participants commenced to provide feedback and suggestions as to how the assessment rubric could be improved. The facilitator would either incorporate the suggested changes to the assessment rubric in real time or further discuss the rationale for suggestions that were made. A critical component of the SaP-inspired workshop structure was implementing the suggested changes immediately, giving participants a sense of agency as they could see the direct and immediate implementation of their feedback. As described in Kirby's student reflection, this approach created a sense of "equal and democratic input" amongst the participants and facilitator.

### Results

Given that the purpose of the project was to create an effective assessment rubric for the reference of first-year law students enrolled in LAWS1005 and completing Assessment 1, the workshop participants were provided with the existing assessment rubric to critique. Tables 1 and 2 below shares aspects of the assessment rubric that participants were provided—the two tables appeared on separate pages in the LAWS1005 Assessment 1 instructions.

**Table 1. The original assessment criteria descriptors for the LAWS1005 Assessment 1**

| ASSESSMENT CRITERIA                 | DESCRIPTOR   |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Clear structure to the presentation | Students should ensure that their presentation has a clear introduction, body and conclusion. Presentations should be structured in a logical manner and not jump around in an unstructured fashion.   |
| Clear oral communication style      | Students should speak in a steady, calm and clear fashion, so that listeners can easily follow their presentation. Students should try not to rely too heavily on written notes; the highest marks will be awarded to students who do not rely on their notes and are able to make and hold eye contact with the audience. |

| ASSESSMENT CRITERIA              | DESCRIPTOR  |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Clarity of meaning               | Students should use terms that clearly convey their meaning. This does not mean that students should always use technical legal terminology. In some situations, it will be very useful for students to explain legal jargon in ‘plain’ English.  |
| Supporting materials/Visual aids | Students are not required to use supporting materials or visual aids. However, where students use supporting materials or visual aids, they should reference relevant information/analysis. The materials should be engaging and appropriate to the topic. Overall, these materials should effectively enhance the presenter’s arguments/topic and assist in engaging the audience. |

**Table 2. The original assessment rubric for the LAWS1005 Assessment 1**

| ASSESSMENT CRITERIA | PERFORMANCE INDICATOR                      |  |  |   |   |
|---------------------|--|--|--|---|---|
|                     | Below expectations (fail) 0-49             | Meets expectations (pass) 50-59                                    | Meets expectations well (credit) 60-69                                   | Exceeds expectations (distinction) 70-79  | High achievement well above expectations (high distinction) 80 and above  |
| Structure           | No clear structure.                        | Very basic structure to presentation is evident.                   | Satisfactory structure.  | Structure is clear and logical; well adapted to subject matter.                     | Structure is compelling; well-constructed use of supporting examples, etc.  |
| Style               | Reading only; no eye contact, very rushed. | Significant reliance on notes; nervous but attempting eye contact. | Still uses notes but makes better use of eye contact; more relaxed pace. | Limited use of notes, if any; knows subject matter and speaks directly to audience. | No notes. Can speak directly to audience with good command of subject matter and well-modulated pace. Posed questions to the audience that were appropriate and engaging. |

| ASSESSMENT CRITERIA                               | PERFORMANCE INDICATOR   |   |   |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|--|--|
|   | Below expectations (fail) 0-49  | Meets expectations (pass) 50-59   | Meets expectations well (credit) 60-69  | Exceeds expectations (distinction) 70-79   | High achievement well above expectations (high distinction) 80 and above   |
| Meaning   | Hard to follow; meaning quite unclear.  | Basic ideas communicated; hard to follow in places.   | Most ideas are conveyed well; may use examples, etc.  | Meaning clearly communicated; examples and paraphrasing used to assist explanations.   | Meaning never in doubt. Clearly, simply and eloquently expressed.  |
| Supporting materials/ Visual aids (if applicable) | Supporting materials/ visual aids detract from the presentation. They do not sufficiently reference information or analysis; and do not support the presentation / authority on the topic or audience engagement. | Supporting materials/ visual aids provide some support to the structure and delivery of the presentation. They reference information or analysis; and provide some support to the presentation. They marginally add to the audience engagement. | Supporting materials/ visual aids support the structure and delivery of the presentation. They reference relevant information and/or analysis. They add to audience engagement. | Support materials/ visual aids substantially support the structure and delivery of the presentation. They reference relevant information and/or analysis. They substantially add to audience engagement. | Supporting materials/ visual aids substantially aid the structure and delivery of the presentation and are used seamlessly to enhance the overall impact of the presentation. They reference the most relevant information and/or analysis; and provide good support to the presentation. They significantly add to audience engagement. |

During the workshop, the participants worked with the academic facilitator to improve the language used in the criterion descriptors. The facilitator explained what a student would need to demonstrate for each assessment criterion to achieve a particular grade, and the participants in turned helped phrase the descriptor using language that would be easily understood by a first-year student. Participants also offered suggestions with respect to the assessment rubric design



and supplementary materials which they believed would assist students in understanding the assessment rubric. Four suggestions were raised that were supported by majority of the participants:

- Featuring assessment criteria descriptors within the assessment rubric,
- Using colour to differentiate the different levels of performance,
- Providing space for feedback for each assessment criterion, and
- Giving accompanying supplementary materials to better understand the assessment rubric descriptors.

Figure 1 below is the revised assessment rubric for the LAWS1005 Assessment 1 that was created through the SaP-inspired workshop which incorporated the first three suggestions that were made by the student participants noted above.

Figure 1. The SaP-inspired revision of the assessment rubric for LAWS1005 Assessment 1

| SaP-inspired suggestion 1:<br>Assessment criteria descriptors to feature within the assessment rubric |   | SaP-inspired workshop suggestion 2:<br>Using colour to differentiate the different levels of performance  |  |   |  |   |
|---|---|---|--|---|--|---|
|   |   | FAIL  | PASS   |   |  |   |
| Criteria descriptor   |   | Below expectations<br>0-49  | Meets expectations<br>50-59  | Above expectations<br>60-69   | Exceed expectations<br>70-79   | Significantly exceeds expectations<br>80-100  |
| <b>Presentation content</b><br>/ 6 marks  | <i>The content of the presentation addresses the assigned question. The information presented is accurate, comprehensive, and well researched. References to primary and secondary sources are made to support the thesis of the presentation.</i>  | The information presented is incorrect or limited. Very little research apparent – minimal references to primary and secondary sources to support arguments raised in the presentation. | The information and research are confined to the unit material provided. Some references to primary and secondary sources to support arguments raised in the presentation. | The information and research extend beyond the unit material provided. Sufficient references made to primary and secondary sources to support arguments raised in the presentation. | The information and research extend beyond the unit material provided, and build on the materials covered in the course. Detailed references made to primary and secondary sources to support arguments raised in the presentation.  | The information and research extend beyond the unit material provided and build on the materials covered in the course. Critical analysis and evaluation of primary and secondary sources were made to support arguments raised in the presentation.  |
| <b>Marker's comments on presentation content:</b>   |   |   |  |   |  |   |
| <b>Presentation structure</b><br>/ 4 marks  | <i>The presentation structure has a distinct introduction, body and conclusion. The ideas and arguments raised in the body of the presentation are organized well to support the thesis of the presentation.</i>  | The presentation has no clear structure.  | The presentation has a basic structure, but at times is difficult to follow.   | The presentation has a satisfactory structure but would benefit from greater organisation of the ideas and arguments raised.  | The presentation has a logical structure and is adapted well to the subject matter. The ideas and arguments are organized in line with the thesis of the presentation.   | The presentation has an exceptionally compelling structure. The ideas and arguments are organized well to support the thesis of the presentation, making the presentation very persuasive.  |
| <b>Marker's comments on presentation structure:</b>   |   |   |  |   |  |   |
| <b>Meaning</b><br>/ 4 marks   | <i>Communicates ideas and arguments clearly, and the terms and language used convey their correct meaning. Technical legal terminology is used appropriately, and where appropriate 'plain English' is used instead of or to explain legal jargon.</i>  | The meaning of core ideas and arguments central to the presentation are occasionally unclear and difficult to follow.   | The meaning of most ideas and arguments raised is communicated clearly but is occasionally difficult to understand or follow during the presentation.                      | The meaning of all ideas and arguments is communicated clearly.   | The meaning of all ideas and arguments is clearly communicated and the meaning is never in doubt. Examples and paraphrasing are used to assist explanations and aid understanding.   | The meaning of all ideas and arguments is clearly, simply, and eloquently communicated. Examples and paraphrasing are used to enhance the audience's understanding and align to the thesis of the presentation.   |
| <b>Marker's comments on clarity of meaning:</b>   |   |   |  |   |  |   |
| <b>Presentation style</b><br>/ 4 marks  | <i>Speaks in a steady, calm and clear fashion, so that the audience can easily follow the presentation. Attention should also be directed to body language and where the student chooses to deliver their presentation. Students should try not to rely too heavily on notes; so that they are able to make and hold eye contact with the audience.</i> | Reads off notes for most of the presentation and attempts little to no eye contact. The presentation style appears to be disorganised and/or rushed.                                    | Significant reliance on notes, however despite nerves attempts eye contact. The presentation style is consistent, calm, and clear.   | Moderate reliance on notes but makes sound eye contact. The presentation style is of a relaxed pace and the presenter appears very composed.  | Limited use of notes and speaks directly to the audience. The presenter appears confident and very knowledgeable in the subject matter.  | Speaks directly to the audience with good command of the subject matter at a well-modulated pace. Excellent use of body language and engages the audience appropriately making the presentation very persuasive.  |
| <b>Marker's comments on presentation style:</b>   |   |   |  |   |  |   |
| <b>Supporting Materials/ Visual Aids</b><br>/ 2 marks   | <i>Some form of supporting materials or visual aids is required. The materials should be engaging and appropriate to the topic. These materials should effectively enhance the presenter's arguments or topic and assist in engaging the audience. Supporting materials or visual aids should be referenced accordingly.</i>                            | The supporting materials/visual aids detract from the presentation. The materials/aids do not contain relevant information.   | The supporting materials/visual aids provide some support to the structure and delivery of the presentation. The materials/aids contain relevant information.              | The supporting materials/visual aids provide support to the structure and delivery of the presentation. The materials/aids are constructed well and contain relevant information.   | The supporting materials/visual aids substantially support the structure and delivery of the presentation and enhance the overall engagement and impact of the presentation. The materials/aids are constructed well and present information in a manner that is easy to understand. | The supporting materials/visual aids substantially support the structure and delivery of the presentation and are used seamlessly to enhance the overall engagement and impact of the presentation. The materials/aids are constructed well and present information in a manner that is easy to understand and contributes to the overall persuasiveness of the presentation. |
| <b>Marker's comments on supporting materials/visual aids:</b>   |   |   |  |   |  |   |
| <b>Reflection</b><br>Pass/Fail  | <i>Critically reflects on the quality of their presentation through completing the 'Assessment 1 – Reflection component' on Blackboard.</i>   | Does not complete all reflection questions on Blackboard.   | Adequately addresses all the reflection questions on Blackboard.   |   |  |   |
| <b>Marker's comments on reflection:</b>   |   |   |  |   |  |   |
| <b>Total grade: / 20 marks</b>  |   |   |  |   |  |   |

*SaP-inspired suggestion 1: Featuring assessment criteria descriptors within the assessment rubric*

Participants expressed a preference for the assessment rubric to have more information and detail. For instance, student participant 4 said: “Once we have an assessment task, I just want the marking rubric to state what we have to do, and then I don’t have to look at anything else.” Similarly, student participant 3 said:

Well I think the suggestion here is perhaps just to combine the two into one spot. . . . You obviously need the instructions/criteria, because you don’t know what you are doing without it, so for instance for presentation structure—[refers to the assessment criteria descriptors] this line here / that box could literally just be next to it, and these would be really simple. . . . Yes, basically an extra column with what you are required to do there, and then next to it [the descriptors].

While the participants acknowledged that the assessment instructions could not necessarily form part of the assessment rubric, they did not want to have to cross reference another document for further information or detail when using the rubric. To ensure that students referring to the assessment rubric understood what was required for each criterion being assessed, the participants suggested that criteria descriptors be included in a separate column next to the assessment criterion.

*SaP-inspired suggestion 2: Using colour to differentiate the different levels of performance*

All the participants supported the suggestion that colour should be incorporated into the assessment rubric to aid interpretation and use. For instance, student participant 5 said: “Maybe if for a visual aid, you could use colour—so like a semi translucent red, yellow, green—then draw the eye towards the higher marks.” Student participant 1 concurred:

Yeah, but could it just be like the top and not the actual whole cells? . . . I think that is easier to read. . . . I think also with the use of colour, you would think it is probably commonly understood, red is worse than green.

The workshop facilitator built on this suggestion: “Another option is you could just make it green so that way it is always positive, and . . . it goes from really light green to really dark green and that way it is just one shade.” But student participant 1 pushed back on that suggestion:

You cannot assign green to a fail . . . if you assign green to it you are saying it’s good . . . it is okay to fail. . . . I just think you can’t assign green to it, unless you want to assign yellow. And just the rest of them are green because it meets expectations, it’s still good.

This exchange illustrates a focus on the psychological perceptions of the use of colours in the assessment rubric. The students’ suggestions offer insight that staff might not have into what contributes not only to readability but also to affective experience.

*SaP-inspired suggestion 3: Providing feedback for each assessment criterion*

Consistent with assessment feedback criticisms raised in academic literature (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008), some participants shared that the most problematic aspect of assessment feedback they have experienced is its generality, including a lack depth and detail, which caused them to question the marker's actual engagement with the submission. As student participant 1 put it: "With a lot of markers, you don't get specific feedback for each section, you just get a very generic comment about your entire assessment." The academic facilitator asked for clarification: "Like holistic feedback?" Student participant 1 clarified:

Yes. Which is hard to improve on because it doesn't tell you what actual area you are going wrong. So, to me, it would be most beneficial [for] the marking or feedback for that certain section to appear under [that assessment criterion].

Student participant 5 further clarified: "Yeah. If you maximise feedback across [each assessment criterion], then you maximise the chance of students improving marks, especially if you have students sitting in that meets expectations range. . . . Yeah, so as much feedback as possible."

Like the feedback from some of the students in Matthews et al.'s (2024) study, students care about maximising meaningful and engaged learning. The inclusion of a row for feedback for each assessment criterion forces the marker to reflect and provide feedback on all assessable aspects of the assessment task, thereby contributing to students' learning process.

*SaP-inspired suggestion 4: Providing accompanying supplementary materials to better understand the assessment rubric descriptors*

While only some participants have had access to model answers and exemplars throughout their university studies, all participants agreed that provision of examples of various standards of the assessment task should be available to supplement the assessment instructions and the assessment rubric to provide greater context and understanding. Student participant 4 described this as "some standard work to correlate words or descriptors in the rubric." Student participant 1 elaborated:

When [we are] given an assignment [task, an example should be provided] . . . probably lower level than expected but kind of setting it out . . . so that you actually know what you are doing instead of being thrown in the deep end in that sense [of not being provided an exemplar].

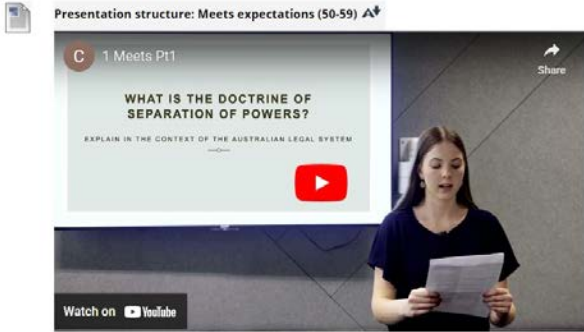
Student participant 2 highlighted the particular importance for students who are new to university: "I think especially in first year, it [would be] most helpful because navigating the rubric was not as familiar, especially first year, first semester when everything is new and different."

When exemplars are provided, they are commonly in the form of a model answer—some of the participants commented that model answers can be intimidating especially in circumstances where students are unsure of what to do or how to begin. Students suggested that exemplars should be provided at each end of the assessment rubric spectrum (i.e., meets expectations [50–59] and significantly exceeds expectations [80–100]), again offering insight that staff might not have into the experience of using a rubric.

Participants suggested that the exemplars should be “bite-sized videos” of no longer than a few minutes as, student participant 5 suggested, “motivation [declines] over time for watching rubric videos.” Students proposed that the short videos be created for each assessment criterion so that students completing the assessment can fully understand each component of the assessment rubric.

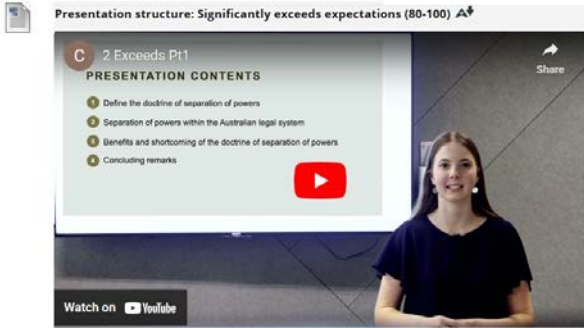
Figures 2 and 3 below are examples of the videos created for the “presentation structure” criterion. Figure 2 is an example of an oral presentation with a structure that meets expectations (50–59) and the corresponding feedback that such a submission would receive. In contrast, Figure 3 is an example of an oral presentation with a structure that significantly exceeds expectations (80–100) and the corresponding feedback that such a submission would receive. These videos with the corresponding assessment rubric and feedback were uploaded to the university’s learning management system for LAWS1005.

**Figure 2. Example of a LAWS1005 Assessment 1 presentation structure that meets expectations (50-59)**



|  |  | FAIL                                     |  | PASS   |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| Criteria descriptor  |  | Below expectations<br>0-49               | Meets expectations<br>50-59  | Above expectations<br>60-69  | Exceed expectations<br>70-79   | Significantly exceeds expectations<br>80-100   |
| <b>Presentation structure</b>  | <i>The presentation structure has a distinct introduction, body and conclusion. The ideas and arguments raised in the body of the presentation are organised well to support the thesis of the presentation.</i> | The presentation has no clear structure. | The presentation has a basic structure, but at times is difficult to follow. | The presentation has a satisfactory structure but would benefit from greater organisation of the ideas and arguments raised. | The presentation has a logical structure and is adapted well to the subject matter. The ideas and arguments are organised in line with the thesis of the presentation. | The presentation has an exceptionally compelling structure. The ideas and arguments are organised well to support the thesis of the presentation, making the presentation very persuasive. |
| 2.25 / 4 marks   |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>Marker’s comments on presentation structure:</b>  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| You started your presentation by stating your assigned question giving the audience context as to what you were presenting. However, your presentation was occasionally difficult to follow as the body was not organised or presented in a logical manner. For example, when discussing the three branches of government you alternated between discussing the functions of the Legislature, Executive and Judiciary – making it difficult for the audience to understand which branch you were discussing. |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Figure 3. Example of a LAWS1005 Assessment 1 presentation structure that significantly exceeds expectations (80–100)**



| Criteria descriptor  | FAIL                                     |  | PASS   |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|
|  | Below expectations<br>0-49               | Meets expectations<br>50-59  | Above expectations<br>60-69  | Exceed expectations<br>70-79   | Significantly exceeds expectations<br>80-100   |
| <b>Presentation structure</b><br>3.5 / 4 marks<br><i>The presentation structure has a distinct introduction, body and conclusion. The ideas and arguments raised in the body of the presentation are organised well to support the thesis of the presentation.</i>   | The presentation has no clear structure. | The presentation has a basic structure, but at times is difficult to follow. | The presentation has a satisfactory structure but would benefit from greater organisation of the ideas and arguments raised. | The presentation has a logical structure and is adapted well to the subject matter. The ideas and arguments are organised in line with the thesis of the presentation. | The presentation has an exceptionally compelling structure. The ideas and arguments are organised well to support the thesis of the presentation, making the presentation very persuasive. |
| <b>Marker's comments on presentation structure:</b><br>Your presentation structure was a very good balance between providing contextual information, eg. definitions and background information, and addressing your allocated question. You started your presentation by stating your assigned question and outlined to the audience the contents of your presentation. By doing this, you provided the audience with a clear map of your presentation, making it easier for your audience to follow your presentation and the arguments you raise. |  |  |  |  |  |

**Project 2: Questionnaire conducted surveying the students who experienced the SaP-inspired outputs**

*Purpose*

The objective of the second component of this project was to examine if the assessment rubric that was created through the SaP-inspired workshop could be easily understood by the first-year students who were required to use the assessment rubric. To ascertain the effectiveness of the revised assessment rubric, quantitative and qualitative feedback was solicited from first-year students who engaged with the assessment rubric.

*Participants*

For the purposes of this component of the project, first-year Curtin University LLB students enrolled in LAWS1005 in Semester 1 2023 were invited to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered in hard copy at the beginning of the LAWS1005 tutorials at the end of the study period in June 2023.

In total, 187 students were enrolled in LAWS1005 in Semester 1 2023, and 125 students completed the questionnaire. This reflects a response rate of 66.8% (N=125).

*Research method*

Questionnaires were created and administered consistently with the survey method of research (Chui, 2017). The administration of questionnaires was chosen over focus groups and interviews because the purpose of the second component of the project was to investigate how students responded to the SaP-inspired redesign of the assessment rubric. A questionnaire was

determined to be the most appropriate method of research as it facilitated data collection required for the purposes of the project in light of the sample size. The questionnaire was comprised of close-ended and open-ended questions all relating to the SaP-inspired redesign of the assessment rubric.

### Results

To determine the effectiveness of the SaP-inspired redesigned assessment rubric, it was critical to ensure that students completing the questionnaire had engaged with the assessment rubric at least once when completing the assessment. To gauge when students referred to the assessment rubric, the following close-ended question was asked in the questionnaire: “Did you refer to the assessment rubric for guidance or instruction before, while, or finalising the task?” Students could select a response of “yes,” “no,” or “I was not aware that there was an assessment rubric” for each of the timing options given (i.e., before, while, or finalising the task).

All students who completed the questionnaire engaged with the SaP-inspired redesigned assessment rubric for at least one stage of the assessment. Significantly, nearly all students (90.4%, N=113) engaged with the assessment rubric *while* engaging with the assessment. Similarly, 84.8% (N=106) also engaged with the assessment task *before* and/or when *finalising* the assessment. This suggests that most students were referring to the assessment rubric more than once while engaging with the assessment.

### Students’ level of understanding of the assessment rubric

To assess the students’ level of understanding of the SaP-inspired redesign of the assessment rubric, the following question was asked in the questionnaire: “If you referred to the assessment rubric at any stage while engaging with the task, did you understand the information that was presented in the assessment rubric? Please briefly explain your answer.” The first portion of the question was a close-ended question with the following responses: “yes—I understood the whole rubric,” “yes—I understood majority of the rubric,” “yes—I understood some of the rubric,” and “no—I did not understand the rubric.” Notably, no students indicated that they did not understand the assessment rubric. Positively, a vast majority, 99.2% (N=124) of the students, indicated that they understood the assessment rubric, admittedly to varying degrees. Fifty-two percent (N=65) understood the whole rubric, 35.2% (N=44) understood the majority of the rubric, and 12% (N=15) understood some of the rubric.

Of the students who completed the questionnaire, 70.4% (N=88) explained their response through the provision of qualitative comments. Below is a reflective sample of the qualitative responses that were provided as to why students understood the *whole*, *majority*, or *some* of the SaP-inspired redesign of the assessment rubric:

- It was detailed and easy to comprehend especially in conjunction with the videos (SQ6).
- It clearly outlined what was expected from each area of the assessment (SQ14).
- None of the terms or phrases used were unfamiliar or unknown. Each section was clearly explained, and though there was some overlap they were distinct (SQ46).
- The information was easy to understand and it helped that each grade level held a description as well (SQ59).

Notably, 31.8% (N=28) of the students' qualitative responses attributed their understanding of the assessment rubric to it being "clear," and 15.9% (N=14) suggested that it was "easy to understand." Given academic literature emphasising the importance of students understanding assessment rubrics and evaluation standards prior to commencing the assessment task (Hounsell, 1987; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008), this result highlights the factors that must be taken into consideration when designing assessment rubrics to increase student understanding. Those factors include the importance of the assessment rubric clearly specifying the assessment criteria being graded and the language used in the descriptors being easy to understand. Significantly, the SaP-inspired workshop participants, who were former students of the unit, shaped these two aspects of the assessment rubric, arguably contributing to the effectiveness of the redesigned assessment rubric. To better comprehend the students' engagement with the SaP-inspired redesigned assessment rubric, students were asked if they understood information regarding the levels of performance and the distinction between the levels presented in the rubric. This was asked as a close-ended, yes/no question.

Although 92% (N=115) of the students felt that they understood the different levels of performance and the distinction between each level presented in the SaP-inspired redesigned assessment rubric, some of the qualitative responses were critical of the descriptors:

- Some of the requirements were very vague in outlining how to get high marks (SQ10).
- Some aspects of the rubric were ambiguous, it was evident what was expected of us but some descriptions were too broad (SQ20).
- I was confused as the distinction between achieving a distinction & [high distinction] mark was minimal & not clear. . . . I found it difficult to know what I needed to improve on to get [a high distinction] (SQ21).

This small sample of the qualitative data appears to be consistent with the academic literature that suggests students are becoming more preoccupied with the final mark or grade than necessarily engaging with the learning process and thereby only engaging in "surface" learning (Winstone et al., 2021; Higgins et al., 2002). These qualitative responses suggest that some students want to be told exactly what they need to do, rather than developing their evaluative expertise to interpret the standards for each level of performance.

#### *Did the students refer to the video supplementary material when completing the assessment*

To determine if the project's proposed videos depicting the various levels of mastery were effective supplementary material, the questionnaire asked the following close-ended question (soliciting responses of "yes," "no," or "unsure"): "Did you refer to the Oral Presentation recorded examples while engaging with the task?" This question was followed by an open-ended question: "If yes, did you find this resource useful and why? Briefly explain your answer." We learned that 69.6% (N=87) of the students who completed the questionnaire referred to the video exemplars when engaging with the assessment. Seventy-six percent (N=95) of the students who completed the questionnaire also provided qualitative feedback as to whether they found the videos useful. Of the 31 students who did not refer to the videos, a majority provided the following explanation to their response: either they "did not know it was there" (SQ1, 48, 64, 98, 99), "forgot" (SQ15, 47, 103), or were not organised enough to view it (SQ70, 82, 83).



A substantial proportion of students who referred to the videos found them useful. Below is a representative sample of the qualitative responses of the students who found the videos helpful, many of which identified standards setting as the reason:

- They demonstrated the expected standard of presentation skills and information (SQ29).
- I liked the contrast between the different standards of the presentation which were given (SQ32).
- Very useful because it helped me understand uni standards (SQ34).
- It helped to compare what was expected for each grade level. I understand what not to do, as well as how to engage with the audience while presenting (SQ75).
- I found this resource somewhat useful. I found the videos with comparison with the rubric useful. The only problem is that I wish it was more in depth (SQ112).

Furthermore, seven students who completed the questionnaire noted that the videos were useful as they provided a visual depiction of the assessment task. We provide a sample of responses below:

- I found it useful because it set out a clear visual presentation (SQ25).
- Yes, extremely. You can only understand and visualise so much from worded explanations. Having visual assistance in the form of videos was extremely helpful, especially regarding speed and tone of voice expected (SQ76).
- I learn best visually (SQ120).

This result is important in that it highlights the relevance of supplementary material in aiding students' overall understanding of the assessment rubrics, in particular, by extending the accessibility of the assessment rubric to accommodate students who need or prefer to absorb information visually.

While the qualitative feedback regarding the videos was mostly positive, there were six students who did not find the videos useful. Below is a representative sample of the qualitative responses of the students who did not find the videos to be helpful, largely because they were too basic or vague:

- Because it wasn't complex, everything was set out in a simple manner (SQ28).
- No, they were very basic and I feel that everyone at a uni level already knows those speaking skills (SQ38).
- They were somewhat helpful. Pretty obvious what was being conveyed – not as useful as I had hoped (SQ74).

Overall, it appears that the videos were generally well received by the students completing the assessment task—69 of 95 students (72.6%) who provided qualitative feedback as to whether they found the recorded videos useful responded positively.



## LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

There are two primary limitations associated with this project. First, with respect to the first component of the project, as participation was voluntary, only five participants were involved in the SaP-inspired workshop. As a result, the perspectives of the participants might not be reflective of students' opinions more broadly. This is a limitation that has been identified by Matthews (2017, p. 3) in acknowledging the importance of facilitating inclusive SaP arrangements that "explicitly address diversity, inclusion or cross-cultural learning" to have a more genuine cross-sectional representation of the student body. On the other hand, while it may appear that five participants is a small sample size, arguably having too many students involved in the workshop would dilute the effectiveness of the exchanges we saw on the SaP-inspired workshop, and such an arrangement might be more like a consultative process. Second, with respect to the second component of the project, the sample size of students who completed the questionnaire was relatively small and only related to one unit taught within the LLB at one Australian university.

In light of the limitations identified with respect to this project, there is scope for further research and collaboration. For example, the SaP-inspired model discussed could be conducted in another discipline or university, and more components might be added to move the project closer to a partnership model. Inviting more students with diverse experiences to make contributions to the assessment rubric design process will result in better outcomes for all students generally. Such additional research could assist in further creating innovative resources that can enhance the student learning and teaching experience.

## CONCLUSION

Incorporation of SaP practices to shape curriculum may be perceived as difficult as university courses are often strictly regulated and require disciplinary expertise. The SaP-inspired model focused on assessment rubric design presented in this article demonstrates a successfully trialled approach through which students can make meaningful contributions to assessment rubrics, which in turn enhanced the learning experiences of fellow students. The success of this SaP-inspired model is evidenced by the positive quantitative and qualitative responses of the majority of the students who directly engaged with the SaP-inspired designed assessment rubric.

While this SaP-inspired model provided a platform for students to make contributions in the assessment rubric design process, this model is only a starting point for co-creation of curriculum and its assessment. For a greater shift towards student-faculty pedagogical partnership (Cook-Sather, 2023), student involvement should extend beyond a workshop and occur earlier in the curricular or assessment design process. To echo Kirby's student reflection, by facilitating SaP opportunities, universities encourage their students to be agents of change "to make a meaningful impact, be bold, make radical suggestions, and ultimately to promote student outcomes" for their peers.

*This research was successfully reviewed and approved by Curtin University Human Research Ethics Office.*

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