

Case Study: Introducing Rubrics in the National Hairdressing Apprenticeship

Organisation: Limerick and Clare ETB

Background:

The nature of the education and training context

National Hairdressing apprenticeship is a three-year apprenticeship in which apprentices gain practical skill development combined with theoretical and academic knowledge.

About the learners

The national hairdressing apprenticeship is currently the only predominantly female (99%) apprenticeship in Ireland.

Challenges faced by learners

Apprentices capabilities vary greatly with apprentices presenting a spectrum of challenges including learning difficulties such as dyslexia, or poor language skills.

Some apprentices have been out of education for some time, while others did not complete their leaving certificate.

The training is delivered face to face, but the majority of the learning content and assessment is accessed through the virtual learning environment 'HairApp', a bespoke Moodle site. This in itself, can present obstacles associated with digital learning including access and acclimatisation.

The assessment briefs can be alien for many apprentices and can cause anxiety for those who may not have sat any kind of assessment in a long time.

Aims:

The rationale for the initiative

Integrated practical exams are a core component of the assessment schedule and a number of learning outcomes are assessed in each exam. For example, in a cutting exam, components from client consultation, health and safety, cutting and styling and finishing may be assessed. Therefore it was decided that rubrics would make it easier to assess the apprentices and to give more accurate and specific feedback, as well as allowing the apprentices a more detailed scope of the standards they would be expected to meet to achieve a passing grade.

The aims for the initiative

- To help the teachers to outline the expectations for the apprentices
- To guide the assessors in grading
- Help apprentices achieve higher grades
- Give specific feedback based on performance
- Identify areas for improvement

Implementation:

What steps were taken

- A course in designing rubrics was designed and implemented by LCETB TEL support services
- Learning outcomes were matched to the assessment schedule
- The subject matter expert and QA met with TEL to define, design and build digital rubrics for assessment and grading in HairApp
- The completed rubrics were rigorously tested on a number of dummy apprentice accounts before being piloted
- The rubrics were piloted and tested in the examination setting by a teacher, supervisor and an assessor
- Findings from the process were fed back to the NHA and adjustments were made
- Teachers received training in marking and grading using the digital rubric
- The assessment rubric was rolled out across all cohorts
- Feedback was welcomed and further adjustments and updates were implemented
- The initial process took approximately three months, with ongoing monitoring and evaluation

Outcomes:

Impact

- Teachers have reported that the apprentices are able to understand the reasoning behind their grades and are able to identify specific areas for improvement
- Teachers have reported that it is easier and fairer to grade assessments using the rubric
- Individual items for feedback is enabled for apprentices

Future plans for the initiative

The success of the rubric in the pilot project has led to other rubrics being implemented in the integrated assessment schedule. There are currently 14 assessments in the apprenticeship that are graded using rubrics. Rubrics will continue to be used for the foreseeable future of the apprenticeship, and other assessments are being reviewed with a view to implementing rubrics in other assessments.

Reflections:

- Digital rubrics lighten the workload the teachers and assessors. Feedback is clearer and areas for improvement are identified.

Challenges:

- Some rubrics were very large and needed to be broken into smaller pieces or divided into sub-rubrics.
- Teachers and assessors needed to be trained and supported in the initial stages of using the rubrics for grading.

Planned improvements:

The rubrics that are in use will be continually reviewed and upgraded to ensure that they are accessible and allow for flexibility in assessing diverse work and capabilities.

What we learned from it

The implementation of rubrics for assessments has ensured fair and equal grading standards nationally. They have proven to be effective tools for assessing and grading, providing clear guidance for both apprentices and teachers while at the same time fostering continuing improvement in attaining learning outcomes.