Grade Assessment Criteria

The following tables provide grade descriptors for Level 3/4/5/6 and Postgraduate Taught, including the taught component of Professional Doctorates, against the University of Staffordshire's revised programme learning outcomes. These descriptors indicate *typical* expected features of performance at each grade band.

They are **not** exhaustive checklists but evidence-based indicators to support consistent judgement across disciplines. Where outcomes vary by subject academics should interpret the descriptors in a discipline-appropriate way.

For example, formal reflective models may be expected in professional practice disciplines, while in scientific disciplines reflection may be demonstrated through methodological evaluation or analysis of personal learning.

Collaboration, application, and professional development are also interpreted within disciplinary contexts.

Assessors should ensure their feedback explicitly links to the descriptors and identifies evidence from student work, including a comment on Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (**SPaG**), where appropriate.

Level 3

Outcome	First (85%+)	First (70-84%)	Upper Second (60–69%)	Lower Second (50–59%)	Third (40–49%)	Marginal Fail (35–39%)	Fail (30-34%)	Fail (0–29%)
Knowledge & Understanding	Shows very detailed and accurate understanding of key ideas; explains concepts clearly and connects them across topics; shows strong understanding of professional or ethical issues; applies knowledge confidently in different contexts.	Comprehensive and accurate knowledge of core ideas; clear grasp of concepts, terms, and context; integrates ideas across topics; shows emerging awareness of ethical/professional issues.	Secure knowledge with mostly accurate use of concepts; makes relevant connections with only minor gaps.	Generally sound grasp of main ideas; occasional inaccuracies or omissions; limited integration across topics.	Basic, largely descriptive understanding; uneven and lacking depth; weak contextual awareness.	Fragmented knowledge; frequent inaccuracies; little sense of context.	Some relevant content but largely inaccurate or confused; key concepts misunderstood; lacks structure and clarity.	Minimal relevant knowledge; significant misunderstandings or irrelevant material.
Reflection	Provides a deep, thoughtful, and well-evidenced reflection; clearly identifies strengths and areas to improve; presents realistic and well-planned next steps with good reasoning	Insightful, evidence-based reflection; recognises strengths and weaknesses; realistic, actionable plan for improvement.	Thoughtful reflection linking experience to learning; identifies strengths and areas to develop; proposes sensible next steps.	Mostly descriptive reflection with some evaluation; indicates areas for improvement but plans lack detail.	Descriptive account with minimal evaluation of learning or impact.	Minimal/superficial reflection; vague comments with little connection to learning.	Attempted reflection but irrelevant or unsupported; lacks self-awareness or evidence of learning.	No meaningful reflection; irrelevant or unsupported claims.

	for choices made.							
Digital Literacy	Uses a wide range of digital tools confidently and effectively (including AI where suitable); presents information clearly and professionally; shows strong awareness of ethical, legal, and accessibility issues; manages data safely and consistently.	Selects, evaluates, and integrates appropriate digital tools and emerging technologies (*including AI where relevant*) effectively; manages files/data systematically and securely; demonstrates critical awareness of ethical, legal, and accessibility issues; presents information clearly in formats suitable for professional or academic dissemination.	Uses appropriate digital tools (including AI tools where relevant) with only minor inefficiencies; demonstrates sound file/data management and digital etiquette; outputs are well-presented with only small issues.	Demonstrates basic tool use with occasional errors; limited awareness of accessibility, version control, or ethical implications of digital/AI use; presentation uneven or inconsistent.	Restricted tool use; frequent errors; weak awareness of safety, accessibility, or responsible use of digital/AI tools; limited organisation of files/data.	Ineffective or inconsistent tool use; poor file handling; little or no evidence of ethical awareness; unsafe or inappropriate use of digital/AI tools; work not presentable in required format.	Minimal digital input; serious errors or missing components; weak or no understanding of digital or AI safety.	Inability to use required tools, including digital or AI-based platforms where relevant; unsafe, unethical, or inappropriate practice; outputs not presentable in the required academic or professional format.
Research Skills	Finds and uses a wide range of credible and current sources; combines information to make clear, well-supported arguments; shows evidence of reading beyond the set	Plans and executes effective searches using a range of digital and academic databases *(and AI tools where appropriate);* selects credible, relevant, and	Conducts appropriate searches; selects relevant sources; referencing mostly accurate with only minor errors; engagement with all reading list texts.	Limited search strategy; mixed source quality; descriptive use of evidence; referencing inconsistently applied; engagement with several reading list texts.	Few or weak sources; minimal engagement with research; significant referencing or attribution issues; evidence of engagement with limited	Very limited evidence of research; unreliable sources; referencing largely absent or inaccurate. No engagement with reading list clear, only limited external	Attempted research but inappropriate or unreliable sources; referencing incorrect or missing; unclear understanding of credibility.	No meaningful engagement with research; raising serious concerns about integrity or ethics.

	list; referencing is accurate and consistent throughout.	current sources; synthesises ideas into coherent arguments; referencing accurate with negligible errors; evident reading outside of the reading list.			reading list texts.	research demonstrated.		
Application & problem-solving	Applies relevant knowledge, ideas and methods confidently to complex, unfamiliar or ambiguous problems; selects and adapts effective approaches independently; develops practical, creative and well-evidenced solutions; explains decisions, likely outcomes and limitations clearly.	Applies appropriate knowledge, concepts and methods accurately to complex or unfamiliar problems; compares possible approaches; develops effective evidence-based solutions; justifies decisions and recognises relevant outcomes and limitations.	Applies relevant knowledge and methods appropriately to identified problems; interprets information accurately; proposes feasible, reasoned solutions supported by evidence; considers some alternative approaches, outcomes or limitations.	Applies some relevant knowledge or methods to recognised problems, although the approach may be partial or uneven; proposes plausible solutions, but these are limited in scope or justification; shows limited consideration of alternatives, outcomes or limitations.	Identifies obvious problems and makes a basic attempt to apply relevant knowledge or methods; solutions are simple, generalised or weakly supported; limited explanation of decisions or likely outcomes.	Demonstrates limited application of relevant knowledge or methods; problem-solving is weak and proposed solutions are speculative, impractical or inappropriate; reasoning and awareness of outcomes or limitations are unclear.	Attempts to address a problem, but the application of knowledge is inaccurate, confused or incomplete; proposed solutions are unsupported, contradictory or not viable.	Demonstrates no meaningful application of relevant knowledge or methods.
Communication	Writing is very clear, fluent, and easy to follow; ideas are well	Clear, coherent structure with purposeful paragraphs;	Well-structured and mostly fluent; minor SPaG errors not	Adequate organisation but uneven structure;	Basic structure which may contain frequent SPaG errors;	Poor structure; pervasive SPaG errors; difficult to follow; visuals	Disorganised writing; very frequent errors; meaning often	Disorganised and unclear; errors prevent understanding.

	organised and paragraphs flow logically; spelling, punctuation, and grammar are almost perfect; visuals and tables are used well to support meaning.	academic tone emerging; negligible SPaG errors; effective use of visuals/tables where appropriate.	affecting meaning; appropriate academic style.	noticeable SPaG or formatting issues; occasional informal style.	weak signposting; clarity sometimes reduced.	misused or absent.	unclear; limited or no attempt at academic tone.	
Critical reasoning & collaboration	Examines complex issues critically from multiple perspectives; evaluates evidence and assumptions to reach independent, well-justified conclusions; works exceptionally effectively with others, integrates diverse contributions and records roles, decisions and progress clearly.	Analyses issues logically and critically; compares evidence, viewpoints and assumptions; develops well-supported judgements; contributes consistently and constructively to collaborative work and maintains clear records of roles, processes and outcomes.	Interprets information appropriately and uses evidence to reach reasoned conclusions, with some consideration of alternative viewpoints; contributes reliably to collaborative work, with some evidence of shared decision-making, roles and participation.	Demonstrates some critical reasoning, although analysis may be descriptive or partially developed; conclusions are plausible but weakly justified; contribution to group work is variable, with limited evidence of coordination or documented participation.	Identifies obvious issues but relies mainly on description or unsupported statements; gives limited consideration to evidence or alternative perspectives; collaboration is inconsistent, with incomplete evidence of roles or contribution.	Demonstrates little critical reasoning; responses are speculative or unclear and conclusions are weakly supported; participation in collaborative work is limited, with poor engagement in shared roles or agreed processes.	Attempts to describe issues but reasoning is confused, unsupported or contradictory; contribution to teamwork is poor or unclear, with little evidence of meaningful participation.	Demonstrates no meaningful critical reasoning; assertions lack evidence or logic; contribution to collaborative work is absent, inappropriate or obstructive, with no respect for shared roles, timelines or outcomes.
Professional Development & Entrepreneurship	Sets clear and ambitious goals for personal, academic, and career	Sets proactive personal, academic, and professional goals; evidence	Sets appropriate goals and tracks progress; demonstrates awareness of	States general development goals with limited follow-through;	Development goals vague or generic; minimal awareness of employability	Minimal engagement with personal or professional development;	Attempted statement of goals but unrealistic or irrelevant; lacks	No engagement with development; absence of realistic actions;

	development; tracks progress through skills logs or CPD; links goals to professional standards or frameworks [please insert]; recognises and assesses realistic opportunities for innovation or improvement.	of growth through skills logs/CPD records; aligns development with employability frameworks or PSRB/professional body standards [please insert]; identifies opportunities for innovation and value creation, with initial evaluation of feasibility and risk.	employability frameworks or PSRB expectations [please insert]; notices opportunities and proposes sensible, realistic actions.	opportunities identified but weakly developed; limited reference to professional or sector expectations [please insert].	needs or PSRB/professional body requirements [please insert]; actions are limited, unfocused, or lack realism.	limited or tokenistic goals with no clear link to employability or PSRB expectations [please insert]; little evidence of meaningful action	follow-through or awareness of employability needs.	behaviours hinder employability, enterprise, or progression towards professional/PSRB standards [please insert].

Level 4

Outcome	First (85%+)	First (70-84%)	Upper Second (60–69%)	Lower Second (50–59%)	Third (40–49%)	Marginal Fail (35–39%)	Fail (30–34%)	Fail (0–29%)
Knowledge & Understanding	Demonstrates excellent depth and accuracy in understanding key theories and concepts; applies ideas with confidence and originality in different or unfamiliar contexts; shows clear awareness of context, assumptions, and limitations.	Comprehensive and detailed understanding of key concepts and theories; applies confidently in context, including unfamiliar examples; demonstrates emerging synthesis and recognition of assumptions and/or limitations.	Strong understanding with clear explanation and appropriate application; only minor inaccuracies.	Sound grasp of core ideas; explanations generally clear; some application but uneven; occasional omissions or errors.	Basic, descriptive understanding of core ideas; limited or generic application.	Minimal understanding; frequent inaccuracies; relevance to task often unclear.	Some relevant content but largely inaccurate or confused; key concepts misunderstood or misapplied.	Insignificant or irrelevant knowledge; largely inaccurate or unrelated content.
Reflection	Provides a thoughtful and analytical reflection using recognised frameworks (e.g. Gibbs, Schön – insert examples); clearly connects experiences with learning; identifies strengths and weaknesses with evidence;	Insightful reflection using recognised frameworks (e.g. Gibbs, Schön;) [please insert examples]; identifies strengths/weaknesses with analysis; sets realistic, time-bound development goals.	Thoughtful reflection using appropriate models (e.g. Gibbs, Schön;) [please insert examples; identifies areas to develop and proposes practical next steps.	Clear reflection with some use of frameworks (e.g. Gibbs, Schön;) [please insert examples; limited depth of analysis; plans lack specificity.	Basic reflection; largely descriptive; shows awareness of strengths/weaknesses but without analysis.	Minimal reflection; vague or superficial comments; little sense of development.	Attempted reflection but largely irrelevant or unsupported; lacks evidence or awareness of learning.	No meaningful reflection, minimal remarks on benefits and gains.

	proposes well-structured and achievable development goals.							
Digital Literacy	Uses a range of appropriate digital tools and platforms effectively and independently (including AI where suitable); presents work professionally; applies strong awareness of ethics, accessibility, and data security in digital environments.	Selects, evaluates, and integrates discipline-appropriate digital tools/platforms effectively; demonstrates ethical use, accessibility awareness, and secure data management; presentation professional.	Effective use of tools to source, evaluate, and present information; awareness of ethics and accessibility evident, with only minor issues.	Uses basic tools appropriately; some evaluation of reliability; presentation generally clear but inconsistent; ethics addressed weakly.	Functional use of tools with frequent issues in file management, formatting, or evaluation of reliability.	Minimal or inappropriate tool use; weak awareness of ethics/accessibility.	Limited attempt at tool use; major errors or missing components; little awareness of data safety or ethics.	No evidence of digital literacy or unsafe practice.
Research Skills	Finds, evaluates, and integrates a wide range of credible sources; builds clear, well-structured arguments supported by evidence; referencing is accurate and consistent throughout; demonstrates initiative in exploring	Identifies, selects, and evaluates credible academic sources; integrates evidence into a coherent line of argument; accurate in-text citations and reference list; effective paraphrasing and synthesis.	Selects relevant sources with some evaluation; evidence integrated clearly; referencing mostly accurate with minor errors.	Uses a range of sources of mixed relevance/quality; engagement largely descriptive; referencing incomplete or inconsistent.	Limited sources; weak engagement with literature; frequent referencing or attribution errors.	Very limited sources; reliance on unreliable material; referencing largely absent or inaccurate.	Attempted research but sources inappropriate or incorrectly used; major referencing issues.	No evidence of meaningful research; unattributed or AI-generated material presented without acknowledgement (integrity concerns).

	materials beyond the core reading list.							
Application & problem-solving	Applies relevant knowledge, theory and discipline-specific methods independently and accurately to complex or unfamiliar problems; develops original, practical and well-evidenced solutions; selects and adapts approaches confidently; evaluates the feasibility, outcomes, implications and limitations of proposed solutions.	Applies appropriate knowledge, concepts and methods accurately to complex or unfamiliar problems; develops effective, evidence-based solutions; compares possible approaches and clearly justifies the selected response; recognises relevant practical implications and limitations.	Applies relevant knowledge and methods effectively to identified problems; develops feasible and reasoned solutions supported by appropriate evidence; demonstrates some consideration of alternative approaches, likely outcomes and limitations.	Applies appropriate knowledge or methods to recognised problems, although application may be routine, partial or uneven; proposes plausible solutions, but their development, evidence or justification is limited.	Identifies obvious problems and makes a basic attempt to apply relevant knowledge or methods; proposed solutions are simplistic, generalised or only partly appropriate, with limited evidence or consideration of likely outcomes.	Demonstrates minimal or inconsistent application of relevant knowledge and methods; solutions are speculative, impractical or weakly connected to the identified problem; reasoning and consideration of outcomes are unclear.	Attempts to address a problem, but the application of knowledge or methods is inaccurate, confused or incomplete; proposed solutions are unsupported, contradictory or unlikely to be effective.	Demonstrates no meaningful application of relevant knowledge, theory or methods; does not identify or develop a viable solution; responses lack evidence, logic and practical relevance.
Communication	Communicates ideas clearly, confidently, and fluently in a consistent academic style; paragraphs flow logically; SPaG is highly accurate;	Communicates ideas clearly and fluently in a structured academic style; accurate SPaG; appropriate and accessible use of visuals/tables;	Clear communication with logical structure; minor SPaG or formatting errors not detrimental to meaning.	Generally effective communication; organisation mostly logical; noticeable errors in language, conventions, or formatting.	Basic clarity but weak organisation; frequent errors in SPaG or formatting; style sometimes informal.	Minimal clarity; structure ineffective; frequent errors impede meaning.	Writing disorganised; persistent language errors; meaning unclear; little evidence of academic style.	No meaningful transfer or knowledge to understanding; work is disorganised and unclear.

	visuals, tables, and formatting strengthen overall presentation.	formatting consistent.						
Critical reasoning & collaboration	Demonstrates highly developed and independent critical reasoning; interrogates evidence, assumptions and competing viewpoints with insight; reaches original and well-justified conclusions while recognising uncertainty and limitations; collaborates exceptionally effectively, integrating diverse contributions and maintaining clear records of roles, decisions and progress.	Critically evaluates evidence, assumptions and alternative viewpoints to develop clear and well-supported judgements; recognises relevant implications and limitations; contributes consistently, responsibly and constructively to collaborative work, with clear evidence of role allocation, shared decision-making and issue resolution.	Evaluates relevant evidence and viewpoints effectively; develops reasoned conclusions with some recognition of assumptions, implications or limitations; contributes constructively to collaborative work, with clear evidence of participation and some documentation of roles or processes.	Demonstrates some critical reasoning, although evaluation may be uneven or partly descriptive; conclusions are plausible but only partly supported; collaborates appropriately, but contributions or records of shared processes may be inconsistent or limited.	Demonstrates basic critical engagement but relies mainly on description or unsupported judgements; gives limited consideration to evidence, assumptions or alternative viewpoints; collaboration is inconsistent or overly reliant on others.	Demonstrates little critical evaluation; reasoning is weak, speculative or unclear, with minimal consideration of alternative viewpoints; participation in collaborative work is limited, with poor respect for agreed roles, responsibilities or timelines.	Attempts to evaluate issues, but reasoning is confused, inaccurate or unsupported; demonstrates little meaningful engagement with evidence or alternative viewpoints; teamwork is poor, and the individual contribution is unclear or inadequately evidenced.	Demonstrates no meaningful critical reasoning or evaluation of evidence; judgements are absent, irrelevant or unsupported; contribution to collaborative work is absent, inappropriate or obstructive, with no respect for shared roles, processes or outcomes.
Professional Development & Entrepreneurship	Shows initiative and forward planning in setting goals linked to employability or	Demonstrates self-awareness and initiative; sets goals aligned with employability or	Identifies development opportunities and sets appropriate, sensible goals;	Aware of strengths and weaknesses; sets general goals but monitoring	Basic awareness of development needs; vague goals; little follow-through.	Minimal awareness of future direction; actions unclear or unrealistic.	Attempted goal-setting but unrealistic or irrelevant; limited understanding	No engagement with development; behaviours impede employability,

	professional standards (e.g. UKPSF or subject body); evaluates realistic opportunities for innovation or development and demonstrates ownership of progress.	professional frameworks (e.g. UKPSF, discipline body standards); identifies opportunities for value creation and evaluates feasibility.	shows some awareness of professional expectations.	limited; opportunities identified but weakly developed.			of employability needs.	enterprise, or professional progression.

Level 5

Outcome	First (85%+)	First (70-84%)	Upper Second (60–69%)	Lower Second (50–59%)	Third (40–49%)	Marginal Fail (35–39%)	Fail (30-34%)	Fail (0–29%)
Knowledge & Understanding	Demonstrates comprehensive, accurate, and confident command of theories, models, and practices; integrates multiple perspectives fluently across topics; applies ideas independently in varied contexts; shows clear awareness of assumptions and limitations with all points supported by credible evidence.	Explains theories, models, and practices with precision; integrates multiple perspectives; demonstrates emerging synthesis across topics; all points supported with credible evidence; negligible errors.	Accurate explanation of key theories and models; integrates perspectives effectively; only minor errors.	Explains most relevant concepts with some integration of perspectives; minor errors or omissions.	Explains main concepts with limited integration; understanding largely descriptive; significant gaps.	Covers some content but omits significant areas; multiple errors; limited awareness of context.	Some relevant material included but largely inaccurate or confused; key theories misunderstood or misapplied.	Very limited knowledge; inaccurate or irrelevant content.
Reflection	Produces a thoughtful, analytical reflection using appropriate frameworks; connects personal insight with professional or academic	Detailed, evidence-based reflection using discipline-appropriate frameworks; links personal insights to professional or academic development;	Evidence-based reflection with specific action plan; links learning to areas for development.	Describes learning and development with some evidence; action plan general or incomplete.	Identifies areas for improvement but in vague terms; little indication of how actions will be implemented.	Minimal evidence of self-assessment; improvement points unclear or unrealistic.	Attempted reflection but largely irrelevant or unsupported; little sense of personal or professional learning.	No evidence of meaningful reflection or self-assessment; no link to personal, academic, or professional development

	growth; presents a clear, well-evidenced, and measurable action plan that demonstrates initiative and realism.	articulates clear, realistic, and measurable action points.						
Digital Literacy	Evaluates and integrates digital and professional tools with confidence (e.g. specialist software, AI-assisted platforms where appropriate, databases; applies strong critical judgement on reliability and ethics; outputs consistently meet professional standards for accuracy, formatting, and presentation.	Evaluates reliability and credibility of digital sources; integrates discipline-specific and professional tools (e.g. statistical packages, creative or simulation software, specialist databases, or emerging tools such as AI-assisted platforms where appropriate) for analysis and communication; outputs consistently formatted and referenced to professional standards.	Uses appropriate digital tools effectively; evaluates sources; presentation generally professional; only minor errors.	Uses tools but with occasional errors in referencing, formatting, or data handling; evaluation limited.	Inconsistent use of tools; frequent errors reduce clarity or professionalism.	Basic tool use with little critical awareness; errors undermine presentation.	Limited or inappropriate tool use; weak or no awareness of ethical or data-handling issues; output incomplete or inaccurate.	No evidence of digital literacy; unsafe or inappropriate practice; outputs unprofessional or unusable
Research Skills	Critically selects, analyses, and	Selects and synthesises credible	Uses credible sources effectively;	Uses credible sources but engagement	Uses relevant sources but with limited	Limited or weak sources; referencing	Some attempt to use sources but unreliable,	No credible sources or referencing;

	synthesises a wide range of credible academic and professional sources; integrates evidence seamlessly into arguments; referencing is accurate, consistent, and professionally presented; demonstrates independent engagement beyond core materials.	academic and professional sources; integrates evidence into analysis; accurate referencing throughout; critical engagement with literature evident.	some critical commentary; referencing mostly accurate with minor errors.	largely descriptive; referencing inconsistent or incomplete.	engagement; frequent referencing errors.	undermines credibility.	irrelevant, or incorrectly referenced; weak understanding of research expectations.	unattributed or AI-generated material presented without acknowledgement (academic integrity concerns)
Application & problem-solving	Applies relevant theories, evidence and discipline-specific methods independently and with precision to complex or unfamiliar problems; develops original, practical and well-evidenced solutions; selects and adapts approaches	Applies relevant theories, evidence and appropriate methods rigorously to complex problems; compares possible approaches and develops effective, evidence-based solutions; clearly justifies the selected response and recognises relevant	Applies appropriate theory, evidence and methods effectively to most relevant problems; develops feasible and reasoned solutions; demonstrates some evaluation of alternative approaches, likely outcomes and limitations.	Applies some relevant theory or methods to identified problems, although application is partial or uneven; proposes plausible solutions, but their scope, development or justification is limited.	Identifies obvious problems and makes a basic attempt to apply relevant theory, evidence or methods; proposed solutions are simplistic, generalised or only partly appropriate.	Identifies few relevant problems and demonstrates minimal or inconsistent application of theory and methods; proposed solutions are weak, speculative or poorly connected to the evidence.	Attempts to address a problem, but the application of theory, evidence or methods is confused, inaccurate or incomplete; proposed solutions are unsupported, contradictory or unlikely to be effective.	Demonstrates no meaningful application of relevant theory, evidence or methods; does not identify or develop a viable solution; responses lack logic, practical relevance and evidential support.

	effectively; critically considers feasibility, professional implications, potential outcomes and limitations.	professional implications and limitations.						
Communication	Presents ideas clearly, persuasively, and professionally using precise academic and discipline-specific language; structure is logical and easy to follow; SPaG is virtually flawless; visuals, tables, and formatting strengthen overall clarity.	Presents information logically, coherently, and professionally; precise discipline-specific vocabulary; negligible language or formatting errors; outputs accessible to academic and professional audiences.	Clear and logical presentation; vocabulary appropriate; minor SPaG or formatting errors not detrimental to meaning.	Organisation adequate but uneven; noticeable errors in language, formatting, or style.	Organisation inconsistent; frequent errors reduce clarity; style sometimes informal.	Weak structure with pervasive errors that impede clarity of work.	Disorganised or unclear writing; pervasive SPaG errors; meaning often obscured; poor academic tone.	No meaningful communication evident.
Critical reasoning & collaboration	Demonstrates exceptional independence and insight when interrogating complex evidence, assumptions and competing perspectives; develops	Critically evaluates evidence, assumptions and alternative perspectives to reach clear and well-supported judgements; recognises relevant implications,	Evaluates relevant evidence and viewpoints effectively; develops reasoned conclusions with some consideration of assumptions, implications or	Demonstrates some critical reasoning, although evaluation is uneven or partly descriptive; conclusions are plausible but only partially supported; contributes	Demonstrates basic critical engagement but relies substantially on description or unsupported judgements; gives limited consideration to evidence, assumptions or	Demonstrates little critical evaluation; reasoning is weak, speculative or unclear, with minimal consideration of alternative perspectives; participation in	Attempts to evaluate issues, but reasoning is confused, inaccurate or unsupported; demonstrates little meaningful engagement with evidence or alternative viewpoints;	Demonstrates no meaningful critical reasoning or evaluation of evidence; judgements are absent, irrelevant or unsupported; contribution to collaborative

	original, balanced and well-justified conclusions while recognising uncertainty and limitations; collaborates exceptionally effectively, integrating diverse contributions, supporting peers and maintaining comprehensive records of roles, decisions and progress.	uncertainties and limitations; contributes consistently, responsibly and constructively to collaborative work, with strong evidence of peer support, shared decision-making and documented contributions.	limitations; contributes constructively to collaborative work and provides clear evidence of participation, shared responsibility and peer engagement.	appropriately to collaborative work, but coordination, documentation or individual contribution may be inconsistent.	alternative viewpoints; collaboration is inconsistent, and contributions may be overly reliant on others.	collaborative work is limited, incomplete or poorly aligned with agreed roles and responsibilities.	contribution to collaborative work is unclear, poorly coordinated or inadequately evidenced.	work is absent, inappropriate or obstructive, with no respect for shared roles, processes or outcomes.
Professional Development & Entrepreneurship	Demonstrates *proactive and reflective engagement* with personal and professional growth; aligns development with relevant frameworks (e.g. UKPSF, SFIA, PSRB standards); *evaluates opportunities for innovation or enterprise* with clear reasoning	Evidences growth in professional skills (e.g. adaptability, initiative, resilience); aligns progress with discipline-specific, institutional, or PSRB/employability frameworks (e.g. UKPSF, SFIA, professional body standards); begins to	Identifies skills with some examples of initiative or adaptability; goals broadly aligned with employability needs.	Identifies skills with limited evidence; general or underdeveloped goals; little evidence of innovation.	Lists skills but without evidence of application; awareness of development needs vague.	Minimal awareness of future goals which are unclear or unrealistic.	Attempts goal-setting but irrelevant or unfeasible; limited awareness of professional expectations.	No evidence of professional development; behaviours impede employability.

	and evidence of feasibility.	evaluate opportunities for innovation, enterprise, or value creation.						

Level 6

Outcome	First (85%+)	First (70-84%)	Upper Second (60–69%)	Lower Second (50–59%)	Third (40–49%)	Fail (30–39%)	Fail (0–29%)
Knowledge & Understanding	Demonstrates authoritative and insightful command of relevant theories, models, and current scholarship; integrates and critiques multiple perspectives with confidence; synthesises ideas across topics and contexts; applies knowledge independently to practice or policy; work is consistently accurate and well-evidenced.	Demonstrates authoritative knowledge of relevant theories, models, and current scholarship; integrates multiple perspectives; synthesises ideas across topics; explicit links to practice or policy; negligible factual errors.	Explains key theories and models accurately; integrates perspectives and some current scholarship; only minor errors.	Explains most relevant theories and concepts; limited integration; occasional inaccuracies.	Explains main theories but largely descriptive; limited integration; significant errors possible.	Omits key areas or shows limited grasp of major concepts; frequent inaccuracies; relevance unclear.	Omits significant areas; frequent inaccuracies; little evidence of conceptual understanding. At the lower end, demonstrates very limited or no relevant knowledge; inaccurate, irrelevant, or incoherent material
Reflection	Produces a critical, theoretically informed reflection that shows clear understanding of personal values, assumptions, and professional identity; integrates evidence and frameworks effectively; sets and justifies	Critically evaluative, evidence-based reflection drawing on appropriate theoretical models; demonstrates awareness of values, assumptions, positionality, and professional identity; links	Clear evaluation of learning with some reference to theory; identifies strengths/weaknesses; proposes specific actions.	Describes development with limited evaluation; action plans vague or general.	Identifies areas for improvement but without detail; analysis minimal.	Minimal evidence of reflection; limited or unsupported statements; no link to development.	Minimal or no evidence of reflection; vague, unsupported, or irrelevant points; no link to professional or academic development

	realistic, measurable goals aligned to professional or academic progression.	reflection explicitly to sector or disciplinary standards; sets measurable and realistic goals aligned to professional or academic progression.					
Digital Literacy	Applies advanced and discipline-specific digital tools confidently (e.g. specialist databases, simulation/modelling, or AI-assisted platforms) to produce professional-quality outputs; evaluates ethical, legal, and accessibility issues critically; presentation is polished and appropriate for professional audiences.	Integrates advanced or discipline-specific digital methods (e.g. specialist databases, simulation/modelling tools, sector software, or emerging tools such as AI-assisted platforms); applies ethical, legal, and accessibility standards consistently; presents outputs suitable for professional or sector audiences.	Uses appropriate digital tools effectively; presentation professional with minor errors; some awareness of ethics and accessibility.	Uses tools with occasional technical, referencing, or formatting errors; evaluation limited.	Inconsistent tool use demonstrated; frequent errors reduce clarity or professionalism.	Minimal or inappropriate tool use; weak awareness of ethics, accessibility, or data handling; output incomplete or inaccurate.	Minimal or inappropriate tool use; limited awareness of ethics, accessibility, or legal issues; unsafe or unprofessional practice.
Research Skills	Engages critically and independently with a wide range of academic and professional sources; evaluates competing arguments and perspectives;	Selects, synthesises, and critically evaluates credible academic and professional sources; integrates evidence into sophisticated	Uses credible sources effectively; some critical evaluation evident; referencing mostly accurate with minor errors.	Uses credible sources but largely descriptive; referencing inconsistent or incomplete.	Relies on relevant but weakly applied sources; frequent referencing errors.	Limited or weak sources; referencing undermines accuracy and credibility.	Limited or weak sources; referencing undermines accuracy and credibility; unattributed or AI-generated material presented without

	integrates evidence coherently into original, well-reasoned analysis; referencing is accurate, consistent, and professionally presented.	analysis; accurate referencing throughout; demonstrates critical engagement with debates or paradigms.					acknowledgement (academic integrity concerns).
Application & problem-solving	Applies advanced theories, evidence and discipline-specific methods independently and creatively to complex, unfamiliar or ambiguous problems; selects, adapts and integrates appropriate approaches with precision; develops original, feasible and well-evidenced solutions; critically assesses implementation, risk, uncertainty, ethical considerations and implications for professional practice or policy.	Applies advanced theories, evidence and discipline-specific methods accurately to complex or ambiguous problems; selects and adapts appropriate approaches independently; develops effective and well-supported solutions; evaluates feasibility, alternatives, limitations and relevant ethical or professional implications.	Applies relevant theory, evidence and methods effectively to complex problems; develops feasible, reasoned and evidence-based solutions; demonstrates some independent selection or adaptation of approaches and considers alternative responses, implications and limitations.	Applies appropriate theory and methods to identified problems, although application may be partial, routine or uneven; proposes plausible solutions supported by some evidence, but evaluation of feasibility, alternatives, implications or limitations is limited.	Identifies obvious problems and makes a basic attempt to apply relevant theory, evidence or methods; proposed solutions are simplistic, underdeveloped or only partly appropriate, with limited justification or consideration of implementation.	Identifies few relevant problems and demonstrates minimal, inaccurate or inconsistent application of theory and methods; proposed solutions are speculative, impractical or weakly connected to the evidence and context.	Demonstrates little or no meaningful application of relevant theory, evidence or methods; does not identify or develop a viable solution; responses are inaccurate, unsupported or lack practical and professional relevance.

Communication	Communicates ideas with authority and precision using fluent, professional, and discipline-specific language; structure is coherent and persuasive; all conventions and referencing are accurate; visuals and formatting enhance clarity for academic and professional audiences	Professional, fluent, and precise communication; accurate academic conventions; discipline-specific vocabulary applied consistently; outputs accessible to academic and professional audiences.	Clear and logical presentation; discipline-appropriate vocabulary; minor SPaG or formatting errors.	Organisation adequate but uneven; noticeable errors in language, formatting, or structure.	Weak organisation; frequent language or formatting errors reduce clarity.	Poorly structured; pervasive language and formatting errors impede readability.	Structure poor; pervasive errors impede meaning.
Critical reasoning & collaboration	Demonstrates authoritative, independent and original critical reasoning when interrogating complex evidence, assumptions, uncertainties and competing perspectives; synthesises diverse viewpoints to reach sophisticated and well-justified conclusions; collaborates with leadership, adaptability and professional	Critically evaluates complex evidence, assumptions and competing perspectives to develop clear, balanced and well-supported judgements; recognises uncertainty, limitations and wider implications; contributes consistently and constructively to collaborative work, demonstrating leadership, peer	Evaluates relevant evidence, assumptions and alternative viewpoints effectively; develops reasoned conclusions with some recognition of uncertainty, implications and limitations; contributes constructively to collaborative work, fulfils agreed responsibilities and provides clear evidence of	Demonstrates some critical evaluation, although reasoning may be uneven or partly descriptive; conclusions are plausible but not consistently supported by evidence; contributes appropriately to collaborative work, but coordination, peer engagement or documentation of individual	Demonstrates basic critical engagement but relies mainly on description, assertion or limited evidence; gives insufficient consideration to assumptions, alternative viewpoints or implications; contribution to collaborative work is inconsistent, limited or overly reliant on others.	Demonstrates little effective critical reasoning; evaluation is weak, confused or speculative, with minimal consideration of evidence or competing perspectives; participation in collaborative work is limited, poorly coordinated or insufficiently aligned with agreed roles and responsibilities.	Demonstrates little or no meaningful critical reasoning or evaluation of evidence; judgements are absent, irrelevant, contradictory or unsupported; contribution to collaborative work is absent, inappropriate or obstructive, with no credible evidence of engagement with shared roles, processes or outcomes.

	judgement, integrating others' expertise, supporting shared learning and maintaining comprehensive evidence of roles, decisions and progress.	support, shared decision-making and clear documentation of contributions.	participation and shared decision-making.	contribution may be limited.			
Professional Development & Entrepreneurship	Critically evaluates and develops professional competencies in relation to recognised frameworks (e.g. SFIA, UKPSF, PSRB standards); demonstrates strategic thinking, leadership, and innovation; plans career or enterprise activity with clear assessment of risk, opportunity, and global context.	Critically evaluates professional competencies in line with employability frameworks (e.g. SFIA, UKPSF, or professional body benchmarks); demonstrates leadership, innovation, and adaptability; articulates realistic career or enterprise planning with awareness of risk, opportunity, and global employability trends; demonstrates alignment with PSRB/professional standards	Identifies most competencies; shows initiative and adaptability; aligns with professional expectations.	Identifies competencies but with limited critical awareness; goals general or underdeveloped.	Lists competencies without evidence of application; awareness vague.	Minimal awareness of professional development needs; unclear or unrealistic goals.	Minimal or no awareness of professional development needs; unclear, unrealistic, or absent goals; behaviours actively impede employability, enterprise, or progression.

University of Staffordshire

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Postgraduate Taught, including the taught component of Professional Doctorates

Outcome	Distinction (85%+)	Distinction (70-84%)	Merit (60–69%)	Pass (50–59%)	Fail (40–49%)	Fail (0–39%)
Knowledge & Understanding	Demonstrates authoritative, original, and critical command of theories, frameworks, paradigms, and current research at the forefront of the discipline; synthesises and critiques competing perspectives with confidence; integrates global, policy, and sector contexts precisely; shows creativity and insight in linking theory to practice.	Critically evaluates and synthesises theories, frameworks, paradigms, and research at the forefront of the discipline; integrates global and sector perspectives; demonstrates originality of thought; explicit and precise links to global policy, sector benchmarks, and/or professional practice; engages critically with competing paradigms.	Explains and critically discusses key frameworks and research; integrates perspectives effectively; demonstrates sound understanding of sector relevance; minor errors only.	Explains relevant theories and models with some critical discussion; integration limited; occasional inaccuracies or omissions.	Descriptive or incomplete discussion of key concepts; limited critical engagement; partial relevance to task; several inaccuracies.	Omits significant areas; limited or absent critical discussion; multiple inaccuracies; little or no evidence of advanced conceptual understanding; work may fall significantly below postgraduate expectations.
Reflection	Produces a deeply reflexive, theoretically grounded, and critically evaluative reflection that integrates identity, positionality, power, and global context; demonstrates strategic insight and transformative learning; articulates specific, evidence-based, and time-bound professional	Comprehensive, critically reflexive evaluation of personal and professional learning; explicitly engages with theoretical frameworks of reflection and sector/professional standards; demonstrates critical awareness of identity, positionality, power, and global context;	Evidence-based evaluation of learning and development; identifies strengths/weaknesses and areas for improvement; articulates specific, measurable actions.	Describes development with some evidence; action plan broad, generic, or incomplete; limited engagement with theory.	Minimal reflection; descriptive or unsupported statements; weak awareness of professional or theoretical context.	Minimal, vague, or absent reflection; no meaningful evidence of reflexivity, professional engagement, or development planning.

	actions aligned to sector or disciplinary standards.	integrates reflection with sector/professional standards and disciplinary debates; articulates strategic, measurable, and time-bound actions aligned to professional trajectories.				
Digital Literacy	Demonstrates mastery in selecting, applying, and critically evaluating advanced and emerging digital tools (e.g. AI-assisted analysis, modelling, simulation, or sector databases); outputs meet or exceed professional publication standards (e.g. journal article, policy report, consultancy deliverable); shows critical ethical, legal, and sustainability awareness including AI and data governance.	Selects and applies advanced or emerging digital tools (e.g. AI-assisted analysis, modelling/visualisation platforms, sector databases); outputs meet standards equivalent to professional or academic dissemination (e.g. journal submission, policy brief, consultancy report); demonstrates critical awareness of ethical, legal, accessibility, sustainability, and data/AI governance implications.	Uses advanced tools effectively; integrates outputs into academic/professional tasks; minor technical, formatting, or referencing errors.	Uses appropriate tools with partial effectiveness; referencing/formatting inconsistent; limited awareness of ethical/professional considerations.	Basic or inconsistent use of digital tools; limited awareness of reliability, ethics, or accessibility; outputs below professional standard.	Inconsistent, unsafe, or inappropriate use of digital or AI-based tools; outputs unprofessional, unusable, or breach ethical/legal standards.
Research Skills	Critically synthesises and evaluates research from a range of peer-reviewed and professional sources;	Selects, synthesises, and critically evaluates high-quality, discipline-appropriate sources;	Selects credible sources and engages in critical evaluation; integration coherent	Selects relevant sources but evaluation largely descriptive; referencing errors	Uses limited or poorly chosen sources; minimal critical engagement; referencing weak or	Weak, unreliable, or absent sources; referencing inaccurate or missing; no evidence of synthesis

	demonstrates methodological sophistication and awareness of epistemological and ontological assumptions; contributes original interpretation or synthesis with rigorous referencing and coherence.	demonstrates systematic review and integration of literature; applies advanced synthesis to construct arguments; referencing accurate and complete; clear awareness and critique of methodological debates, epistemological positioning, and implications for knowledge production.	but limited; referencing mostly accurate with minor errors.	frequent; limited synthesis.	inconsistent; lacks awareness of methodology.	or engagement with methodological/epistemological debates; academic integrity concerns (e.g. unattributed or AI-generated material).
Application & problem-solving	Applies advanced theoretical, methodological and discipline-specific knowledge independently and with exceptional precision to complex, ambiguous or unfamiliar problems; integrates and adapts approaches creatively; develops original, innovative and rigorously evidenced solutions; demonstrates sophisticated consideration of feasibility, uncertainty, risk, implementation and ethical,	Applies advanced theoretical, methodological and discipline-specific approaches accurately to complex or ambiguous problems; selects and adapts appropriate methods independently; develops original, feasible and well-evidenced solutions; evaluates implementation requirements, risks, limitations and relevant ethical,	Applies relevant advanced theory, evidence and methods effectively to complex problems; develops feasible and appropriately evidenced solutions; demonstrates some independent selection or adaptation of approaches and considers implementation, alternative responses, uncertainty and limitations.	Applies relevant theory, evidence or methods to identified problems, although application may be partial, conventional or uneven; proposes plausible solutions, but their development, feasibility, evidential support or justification is limited.	Demonstrates limited or inconsistent application of relevant theory and methods; identifies some aspects of the problem but develops solutions that are simplistic, underdeveloped, speculative or weakly connected to the evidence and context.	Demonstrates minimal or no meaningful application of relevant theory, evidence or discipline-specific methods; fails to identify or address the problem adequately; proposed solutions are absent, inaccurate, unsupported, inappropriate or lack postgraduate and professional credibility.

	professional, global or policy implications.	professional or global implications.				
Communication	Communicates with clarity, authority, and persuasive sophistication suitable for publication or professional dissemination (e.g. peer-reviewed outputs, policy briefs, professional reports); integrates text, visuals, and digital formats effectively; academic conventions are flawless.	Communicates with authority, precision, and persuasiveness; conforms to standards expected for academic or professional dissemination (e.g. peer-reviewed articles, consultancy reports, sector guidance, or policy briefs); integrates multimodal and digital formats appropriately; negligible errors.	Clear, logical, and professional communication; academic conventions followed with minor errors; vocabulary discipline appropriate.	Organisation adequate but uneven; errors in language, referencing, or conventions reduce clarity; style inconsistent.	Disorganised or weakly structured; frequent language and referencing errors; clarity limited.	Disorganised, unclear, and error-ridden communication; fails to conform to basic postgraduate academic conventions.
Critical reasoning & collaboration	Demonstrates authoritative, original and independent critical reasoning when interrogating complex evidence, assumptions, epistemological positions, uncertainties and competing perspectives; synthesises diverse viewpoints to reach sophisticated and defensible judgements; demonstrates exceptional leadership and professional judgement in collaborative work,	Critically interrogates complex evidence, assumptions, theoretical positions and competing perspectives to develop original, balanced and well-supported judgements; recognises uncertainty, limitations and wider ethical, professional or global implications; contributes strategically and constructively to collaborative work through leadership, negotiation, conflict resolution, peer	Critically evaluates relevant evidence, assumptions and alternative perspectives effectively; develops reasoned and well-supported conclusions with appropriate recognition of limitations and implications; contributes constructively to collaborative work, fulfils agreed responsibilities and provides clear evidence of shared decision-making, professional conduct and peer engagement.	Demonstrates some critical evaluation, although reasoning may be uneven, conventional or partly descriptive; conclusions are plausible but not consistently supported; contributes appropriately to collaborative work, but leadership, coordination, documentation, timeliness or individual contribution may be limited or inconsistent.	Demonstrates limited critical reasoning; evaluation is weak, superficial, confused or speculative, with insufficient engagement with evidence, assumptions or competing perspectives; participation in collaborative work is minimal, poorly coordinated or insufficiently aligned with agreed roles, standards and responsibilities.	Demonstrates minimal or no meaningful critical reasoning or evaluation of evidence; judgements are absent, irrelevant, contradictory or unsupported; contribution to collaborative work is absent, inappropriate or obstructive, with no credible evidence of engagement with shared roles, professional processes, collective decisions or outcomes.

	negotiates competing priorities, integrates diverse expertise and provides comprehensive evidence of collective decisions, responsibilities, impact and learning.	support and clearly documented shared decision-making.				
Professional Development & Entrepreneurship	Demonstrates advanced professional insight and strategic capacity; aligns competencies with international, sector, and PSRB benchmarks (e.g. UKPSF, SFIA, professional body standards); shows innovation, leadership, and global employability awareness; formulates realistic, evidence-based career or enterprise strategies informed by critical self-awareness.	Evidence of advanced professional competencies aligned with sector frameworks (e.g. UKPSF, SFIA, discipline benchmarks); demonstrates leadership, innovation, risk management, strategic foresight, and global employability awareness; evidence alignment with PSRB/professional frameworks where applicable.; articulates global employability awareness and realistic forward planning for career or enterprise development.	Identifies and develops professional competencies; demonstrates initiative and adaptability; forward planning evident but limited in scope.	Identifies competencies but evidence minimal; goals broad or undeveloped; limited innovation or adaptability.	Limited or vague awareness of professional development; unrealistic or incomplete goals; weak employability links.	no meaningful evidence of professional or enterprise development; goals vague, absent, or unrealistic; behaviours impede employability, enterprise, or progression to doctoral/professional practice.