**Mark Scheme for Assessed Discussions: With Definitions**

Further explanation and associated examples of the highlighted terms can be found below.

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| **Top 1st**80+ | * responses consistently answer the question directly and are clearly expressed; there is ample evidence that the student is aware of, and engaging with, the complexities of the discussion topic
* responses are analytical, communicating a sophisticated understanding of, and an ability to reflect on, the discussion topic
* opinions expressed are always well-informed, drawing on a range of appropriate evidence, which may include own experience, to construct a sophisticated argument and to illustrate, support or develop discussion
* demonstrates engagement by consistently responding to/developing points made by a number of others, giving consistently well-supported reasons for agreement and/or disagreement
* consistently makes connections, raises questions, develops arguments, moves discussion forward
* demonstrates sensitivity in responses to others, even when challenging their viewpoints
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| **‘Excellent’** |
| **First**70-79 | * responses directly answer the question and are clearly expressed; they add value and there is evidence that the student is thinking critically about, and reflecting on, the topic of discussion
* opinions expressed are for the most part well-informed, drawing on appropriate evidence, which may include own experience, to construct a reasoned argument and to illustrate, support or develop discussion
* demonstrates engagement by responding to/developing points made by others, with well-argued reasons for agreement/disagreement
* makes connections, raises questions, develops arguments, moves discussion forward
* demonstrates sensitivity in responses to others, even when challenging their viewpoints
 |
| **‘Very Good’** |
| **2:1**60-69 | * responses mostly answer the question directly, and are clearly expressed; they usually add value, and there is evidence that the student is thinking about, and reflecting on, the topic of discussion, and not simply accepting it/dismissing it uncritically
* opinions expressed are generally supported by appropriate evidence, which may include the student’s own experience
* arguments are usually well developed, and points of view are usually well illustrated or justified
* demonstrates engagement by responding to/developing points made by others, usually giving reasons for agreement/ disagreement;
* raises questions, moves discussion forward
* usually demonstrates sensitivity in responses to others
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| **‘Good’** |
| **2:2**50-59 | * responses likely to be straightforward and are usually clearly expressed, although they may not always answer the question fully or directly; they may add some value, and there is some evidence that the student is thinking about the topic of discussion, and not simply accepting it/dismissing it uncritically. There may be some evidence of reflection.
* opinions expressed are usually supported by appropriate evidence, which may include own experience, though arguments may not always be well developed, and points of view may not always be well illustrated or justified
* usually demonstrates engagement by responding to/developing points made by others, usually giving reasons for agreement/ disagreement
* attempts to raise questions, move discussion forward
* demonstrates some sensitivity in responses to others

**N.B.** Responses in the 2:2 range may be uneven – they do some things well, but others badly, or not at all. |
| **‘Solid’** |
| **Third**40-49 | * responses are likely to be descriptive, and may not be clearly expressed. It may not always be clear how the response answers the question.
* opinions are likely to be asserted rather than supported, and arguments are likely to be undeveloped
* attempts to draw on unit content or own experience likely to be vague and general and the relevance of examples not always clear
* sometimes agrees/disagrees with points made by others with some attempt at development – may add an example, or a simple reason for agreement but engagement doesn’t go beyond that
* may demonstrate sensitivity in responses to others
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| **‘Limited’** |
| **Comp****Fail**30-39 | * Work below the standard required. **There may be some evidence of basic understanding and/or achievement but with errors or other inadequacies.**
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| **‘Poor’** |
| **Fail**29 and below | * barely responds; responses are unclear, miss the point or fail to answer the question
* doesn’t attempt to express opinion or just repeats what others have said
* little or no evidence of student having thought about the topic
* does not refer to responses of others at all, or only does so in a vague or general way
* responds to others abruptly or insensitively
 |
| **‘Very Poor’** |

**Explanation of terms**

**Engaging (engagement):** To engage with a topic or a task is to be ‘involved’ with it by being committed to understanding and exploring it. To really engage with something, you need to be interested in it. Your activities in relation to the topic or task are meaningful and have a purpose when you are engaged with it. The opposite of engagement in this case would be detachment. For example, you can show engagement in your responses by providing examples to illustrate your points, by asking questions and building on points made by others.

**Analytical (analysis):** Analysis means breaking something (a topic, a question, an argument, a theory, a situation) down into its component parts, isolating and examining each part, and thinking about how they fit together into a whole. You might want to think of analysis as going ‘back to basics’. As an example, if you are asked to ‘Analyse arguments against the death penalty’, you would go about this by isolating the key arguments and subjecting each to scrutiny and questioning – picking the arguments apart, so to speak.

**Understanding:** To understand something is to grasp what it means, to perceive its significance, and to appreciate what its implications are.

**Reflection:** to reflect on something is to give it careful, attentive consideration, with a view to achieving a new or a more nuanced understanding of it. To reflect is to take time out to really think about something, and this sometimes means that reflection is a prolonged activity. Reflection cannot be rushed; ‘quick reflection’ is a contradiction in terms!

On the discussion boards, we ask you to reflect on questions and topics, but we also use reflection to mean ‘self-examination’. In such cases, we are asking you to subject your own experiences and opinions to careful scrutiny, to examine your own beliefs and to ask yourself why you hold them.

Whilst almost everyone has some ability to reflect, we expect you to treat reflection as an academic activity. The challenge is to make sure that your ability to reflect is informed by your learning, and not just by your personal experiences (see **Well-informed**). Your ability to reflect effectively improves with education; just experiencing something isn’t enough to enable you to speak authoritatively about it. You need to be able to review your experiences to really learn from them, and your education helps you to do this. Reflective questions which you might think about as you compose your discussion posts include ‘What went well?’, ‘What could have gone better?’ and ‘What would you do differently next time?’ You can apply these questions to leaders, projects, or to your own actions, depending on the question you are being asked.

**Well-informed:** Opinions which are well-informed are supported by knowledge, understanding and, crucially, evidence, which are the fruits of careful research. Before stating opinions or reaching conclusions on the discussion boards, it is essential that you equip yourself with knowledge and understanding of the issues, and the way to do this is by reading good quality, relevant academic texts, engaging with the unit content / lecture material [delete as appropriate], reading other students’ posts, and conducting any other relevant research, which may include drawing on your own experience. Well-informed opinions make it obvious that you know what you are talking about and aren’t just making things up ‘on the hoof’. In addition to the actual text of your posts, your references will also make it clear how well-informed you are, so remember to use reliable academic sources (see **Appropriate evidence**).

**Appropriate evidence:** ‘Appropriate evidence’ means academic sources, such as books, journal articles, some Internet resources, and some multimedia. Official reports, policy documents and some newspapers (not tabloids) are also acceptable. Wikipedia is not appropriate evidence to cite in your discussion posts. It is reasonable to use Wikipedia to give yourself an overview of a topic, to get yourself started off, but you should not use it to support your arguments. You should also cite evidence from your own experience carefully, and in most cases sparingly (unless specifically asked to refer to your own experience), because your own experience is not academically authoritative. Make sure you refer to your own experience only if it is relevant and if you can draw conclusions from it which have wider relevance. It is your responsibility to make clear how and in what ways your experience is relevant to the discussion at hand.

**Construct:** To construct an argument or a piece of work means to organise your points or claims in a logical way, so that they flow coherently from one to other, culminating in a strong conclusion which is signposted and supported by all of the points which have gone before. It might help to think of your argument or piece of work as a structure composed of individual building blocks (representing each individual point or claim) which stack up to form a completed structure (your overall argument or piece of work).

**Sophisticated:** A sophisticated argument is well-researched, well-supported using appropriate evidence, engaged, analytic, evaluative (weighs arguments for and against, using the evidence on both sides to make a judgement about which is most valid or valuable), and reflective. Sophisticated arguments are nuanced and sometimes complex, and they demonstrate in-depth, rather than basic, understanding. Compare with **Straightforward**.

**Illustrate, support or develop:** To illustrate means to make something clear and to show it to be true, by providing evidence which supports your view. For example, you would be able to illustrate the truth of your claim that HIV/AIDS is a Sub-Saharan African pandemic by citing statistics which highlight its prevalence. To support is to provide solid evidence to back up an opinion, perhaps a quote from a reputable journal. To develop is to expand upon a point in a way which makes it stronger and more engaging for your audience, perhaps by providing more detail or adding some supporting evidence or examples which help to demonstrate its validity (truth). It might help to think about it as 'growing' your argument, in the way you would help a plant to grow by watering and adding nutrients to it. See also **Appropriate evidence**.

**Consistently:** To be consistent is to repeat an activity regularly. In this context, we use it to mean making a practice of responding to other people’s posts not just once, but several times a week, every week.

**Well-supported:** Well-supported reasons have reliable, relevant, and persuasive evidence and examples to back them up. Evidence might be a quotation or some statistics from an academically robust book or journal; in some cases, it could come from your own experience, but bear in mind the advice given under **Appropriate evidence** above. The comments under **Well-informed** are also relevant.

A general note of caution is thatwhen you are using other people’s work to support your arguments, be careful to reference it very clearly.Do not try to pass off other people’s work as yours, or risk the appearance that you are doing so; use it instead to support your own and to make it clear where your ideas have come from, if they are not yours.

**Makes connections:** A post which makes connections is able to link from the topic you are being asked to think about to other related issues and ideas, whether these be from earlier posts, your own or another student’s, the unit content / the lecture [delete as appropriate], volunteering activities, or the wider political / cultural / economic / global context, in order to advance and enrich the discussion.

**Moves discussion forward:** Discussions are moved forward (developed, enriched) when new perspectives are raised, when questions are asked which challenge the way the discussion is going, or when points are made which expand on and support prior claims, thus strengthening them. See also **Add value**.

**‘Sensitivity…challenging’:** It is perfectly possible – in fact, it is essential academic practice – to demonstrate sensitivity while challenging someone else’s viewpoint. This is what makes for fruitful and constructive academic debate. Being sensitive on the discussion boards means using measured and moderate language to question or to express disagreement. In the most basic terms, this means not being rude, dismissive or abrupt in response to another student’s view. When you disagree with someone, as well as expressing your view sensitively, you must make sure that you provide reasons for your disagreement. If you do not do this, your disagreement lacks authority and appears dogmatic (unfounded and inflexible). Instead of writing ‘You are wrong’, you should write something like ‘I would like to challenge your opinion because, according to my research…’. See also **Justified**.

**Add value:** Posts which add value develop the discussion, perhaps by offering a fresh opinion which stimulates further debate; by raising an interesting question which takes the discussion down a new route; or by introducing a relevant example which supports a point that has already been made. See also **Moves discussion forward**.

**Thinking critically:** Critical thinking is the basis of academic writing, and many of the other terms which are explained here fall under its umbrella. Analysis, reflection, reasoning and evaluation are all part of the process of critical thinking. It is a misunderstood term and can seem quite vague. Critical thinking simply means not accepting things at face value – asking questions, challenging ‘received wisdom’, demanding evidence for claims, theories, existing ways of thinking. Critical thinkers think things through for themselves and are prepared for the possibility that they may reach different opinions to others; they do not agree with things simply because they have been suggested. Critically assessing other people’s work is essential for informing your own learning. It might help to think of it as ‘reading between the lines’.

There are some very good resources that explain what critical thinking is and how to do it, especially:

<http://www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk/critical_thinking.html>

<http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/learning-at-university/critical-thinking-and-reflection/> This URL also includes a link to a video that gives you practical advice about how to develop your critical thinking skills: <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/videoresources/criticalthinking_student/> The video also contains information on critical thinking for international students and provides links to a wealth of other resources on critical thinking.

**Reasoned:** A reasoned argument is logical and consistent, has been constructed with attention to detail, and is supported with appropriate evidence. Reasoned arguments make good sense based on the available evidence. See also **Appropriate evidence**.

**Justified (justify):** To justify an opinion is to explain why you think it is right and to defend it using appropriate evidence. It is not acceptable academic practice to state an opinion without explaining *why* you hold it, and without providing appropriate evidence and examples which support its validity. See also **Appropriate evidence**.

**Straightforward:** Straightforward responses lack complexity and **sophistication**, and do not demonstrate **critical thinking**. To respond to the question in a straightforward way suggests that you are not really **engaged** with the topic and have not really grasped what the question is asking you; or, if you *have*, that you are not making an effort address it **analytically** and **reflectively**. Posts which are straightforward are often **descriptive,** undeveloped and basic. They state an answer to the question, but they don’t do much more than that.

**Uneven:** An uneven performance on the discussion boards means one that is inconsistent in quality. Some of your posts might be good (well-written, analytic, well-supported) but others might be of a much lower quality (poorly written, descriptive, undeveloped). If you are capable of writing *some* good posts, then there is no reason why *all* of your posts cannot be good. It is essential that you maintain consistency in the quality of your posts, because any marks you lose for weaker posts are avoidable.

**Descriptive:** Posts which are descriptive simply describe situations, actions, and initiatives. They do not provide evidence that you are thinking about these things analytically and they do not allow you to demonstrate that you are capable of original, independent thought. Of course, if a discussion question is specifically asking you to describe something, you will have to spend a few sentences doing just that. We are not saying that posts should not include any description, but that description must be brief and **must be** followed by analysis and evaluation. You will not be asked a question on the discussion boards which requires you only to describe something; you will always be asked to include reflection, analysis and evaluation, so it will be impossible for posts which are entirely descriptive to meet all parts of the brief.

**Asserted (assert):** To assert an opinion is to state it as true without justifying it with reasons and appropriate supporting evidence (see **Appropriate evidence** and **Justified** above).

**Vague:** Vagueness means a lack of clarity and precision, or, if it’s easier to think about it this way, a ‘fuzziness’ to your arguments. It often presents itself in academic work in the form of generalisations, sweeping statements or an absence of appropriate and accurate referencing. When your writing is vague, this suggests that you are not convinced about the point you are making, that you ‘don’t know your stuff’, so to speak, and that you are engaging in guess work. Vagueness gives the impression that you do not understand what you are writing about, and this is why it is crucial to do your research before writing your posts.

**Errors:** These could be spelling or punctuation errors, factual errors (which can be embarrassing and are in most cases very easily avoidable, with a little research), errors in referencing, such as giving incorrect titles for books or articles, or misunderstandings or misrepresentations of points made in other posts. In most cases, errors can be easily corrected by using a spell check.