## This guide outlines key considerations when determining appropriate summative assessment workloads and equivalencies.

Assessment workload and equivalency – practice guide

Before you read on, please note that determining appropriate assessment workload is just one element of holistic assessment design. It should *always* be considered in context with the overall development of a coherent programme assessment strategy.

### Four things to consider when identifying appropriate assessment workloads:

**Consistency** – There should be consistency in assessment workload tariffs for modules of the same level and credit value across a programme.

**Student effort –** Assessment workload and equivalency is most helpfully thought about in terms of student effort appropriate for the level and weighting of the assessment.

**Notional learning hours** – Assessment workloads are part of the total module learning hours, and should represent the student effort involved.

**Communication** – Explicit communication with students about the rationale for assessment should include information about workload expectations.

## Overview

Assessment is a key component of the curriculum and the way in which it is designed significantly influences student learning behaviour. Student feedback often highlights challenges associated with assessment workload. This can indicate that the assessment workload demands are either inconsistent or excessive, that students experience too much summative assessment at the same time (assessment bunching), or that students do not understand the value in the assessment tasks they have been set.

External Examiners may also comment on ‘over-assessment’ relative to comparable courses in the wider sector. This can reflect concern for staff marking workloads, or requiring students to complete more work than is either necessary or desirable to demonstrate standards. As such, departments may be seeking strategies to address through iterative programme enhancements.

Programmes with large numbers of modules, particularly with where many smaller modules exist, can also lead to an increase in the total number of summative assessments that students are required to complete. This can exacerbate the challenges of timing and volume for both staff and students. (Nicol, 2010) It can also unintentionally reinforce practices of testing decontextualized information, rather than assessing more cognitively challenging higher order learning. (Villarroel et al, 2017)

The volume of summative assessments and their associated workload invariably impacts on staff marking time. Whilst it is important to ensure that the assessments remain valid, rigorous and reliable, it is helpful to reflect on whether there are alternative assessment approaches or practices that can help to reduce demands on students and staff. For example: Reducing the number of learning outcomes; Reducing the number of summative assessments; Increased use of lower stakes formative assessment; Synoptic assessment; The introduction of peer- and self-assessment approaches; Employing marking calibration activities amongst marking teams; Adopting consistent approaches to the timing, purpose and volume of feedback.

[Additional guidance and resources for assessment design and practice.](https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/od-and-ed/educational-development/assessment-practice/assessment-principles/)

## **Consistency** – There should be consistency in assessment workload tariffs for modules of the same level and credit value across a programme.

Lancaster does not specify word limits for coursework. Establishing university-wide assessment workload equivalency is problematic due the variable needs and conventions of disciplines and PSRB requirements.

The desirable outcome is to achieve clarity and consistency in the assessment workload expectations across modules that are at the same level and credit value at a programme or department level. Improved consistency helps to manage student expectations, ensures that demands being placed on students are equitable and inclusive, and reduces the risk of assessment and marking overload.

Conducting [programme-level assessment mapping](https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/academic-standards-and-quality/information-and-resources/quality-assurance-and-enhancement/programme-design-development-and-approval/) with a particular focus on timing, volume and current workload demands can be effective at improving levels of consistency. Mapping also offers a mechanism for programme teams to periodically review and take account of any discrepancies between the intended and actual time commitment needed from students to perform assessment tasks.

Assessment design should be aligned to learning outcomes, providing students with the opportunity to demonstrate the range and depth of what they have learned, consistent with the credit value of the module and the level of study. In a coherent programme design, students should be able to see the relationships between modules and assessments, and be able to develop an understanding of how and why they are being assessed – i.e. develop their ‘assessment literacy’. (Jessop & Tomas, 2017; QAA, 2018) Guidance on the development of learning outcomes can be found on the learning outcomes pages of the [Curriculum Design microsite](https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/oed/educational-development/curriculum-design/learning-outcomes/).

## **Student effort –** Assessment workload and equivalency is most helpfully thought about in terms of student effort appropriate for the level and weighting of the assessment.

This guidance advocates measuring assessment workload and equivalency in terms of student effort, rather than word count. As assessment methods and approaches continue to diversify, particularly in response to increased use of online assessment practices in the pandemic and post-pandemic era, assessments output will continue to vary.

Written work places varying demands on student time depending on what is needed in preparation, the level and complexity, and nature of the writing task. This means that trying to establish word count equivalency with other modes of assessment output (for instance presentations, practical, group-based assessment, performance, production of digital artefacts, coding etc) is challenging. (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007)

Approaches taken by programme teams should also reflect students’ development of assessment literacy, and the increasing complexity in what is required to evidence learning at higher levels of study. For instance, what is required of students in writing an essay at level 4 will differ to an essay at level 6. As such, the assessment workloads might need to be different to ensure that students have sufficient scope to able to demonstrate how they have met the learning outcomes.

## **Notional learning hours** – Assessment workloads are part of the total module learning hours and should represent the student effort involved.

Student learning hours are notionally proportional to the number of academic credits being awarded for a module. The total learning hours for a module includes all learning activity including the assessment.

It is helpful to understand that in UK Higher Education we assign a notional 10 hours of learning to each academic credit, i.e. a 20-credit module involves a notional 200 student learning hours. Those learning hours reflect taught contact time, but are largely for teacher-directed and/or self-directed independent learning. Independent learning can include a wide range of activities such as background reading, peer group work, online activities, preparation for seminars, preparation for flipped / blended teaching events, *and* assessment-related activities.

It is suggested that the proportion of effort placed on assessment should typically amount to at least 20-30% of the total module learning hours. (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007) It may of course be greater than this, for example you might expect a high proportion of the total learning hours for a dissertation module being oriented towards assessment activity.

For example:

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| --- |
| **20 Credit Module** |
| **200** notional learning hours(contact time, directed study, independent study including assessment preparation) | Assessment learning hours/preparation constitutes at least **20%** of the notional module learning hours | **= c. 40 hours** notional learning hours for all assessment-related activity  |

### Equivalency examples

We can use the currency of learning hours to reflect on the potential equivalency of assessment tasks. Please note that the examples below are included for **illustrative purposes only**.

Departments may wish to develop a similar framework to achieve consistency in their own areas, with reference to [*Lancaster’s Assessment Regulations*](https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/academic-standards-and-quality/regulations-policies-and-committees/manual-of-academic-regulations-and-procedures/). Departments might also consider a maximum number of summative assessments per module.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Assessment Type** | **Workload description** | **Student effort in learning hours** | **Credits** |
| Written essay | 1000 words | 10 h | 5 |
| Exam / test | 1 hour | 10 h | 5 |
| Reflective journal/log | 1000 words | 10 h | 5 |
| Lab/practical report | 1000 words | 10 h | 5 |
| Group assignment | 750 words per member | 10 h | 5 |
| Individual presentation | 15 minutes | 20 h | 10 |
| Viva/oral presentation | 20-30 minutes | 20 h | 10 |
| Small Group presentation | 10 minutes per member | 20 h | 10 |
| Portfolio of evidence | 4000 words | 40 h | 20 |
| Research proposal, small project | 4000 words | 40 h | 20 |
| Research project/dissertation | 8000 words | 80 h | 40 |

(example from Ulster University, 2018)

## **Communication** – Clear communication with students about the rationale for assessment should include information about workload expectations.

Implementing an assessment strategy requires appropriate preparatory support for students. This involves students having sufficient opportunity to engage with and develop the disciplinary knowledge and skills they are required to demonstrate in order to meet the learning outcomes. It also needs students and staff to develop a shared understanding of the rationale, processes and standards for assessment. This heightened awareness of the standards and criteria for assessment promotes good academic practice and integrity.

Developing ‘assessment literacy’ includes explanation of the patterns, timings and workloads associated with assessment design. Students should be able to see clear alignment between task designs and the assessment criteria. Assessment workloads may be perceived to be inequitable even where there are sound educational reasons for the difference. Explaining the rationale for assessment designs and workloads can help resolve perceived inconsistencies. (Carless & Boud, 2018)

Other conventions and practices that can be developed to achieve greater consistency can include: Establishing a consistent approach to workload variances (e.g. specifying a word length range, or setting a limit with a tolerance of +/-10%); Dialogue with students about the time and expected activity associated to the preparation of different types of assessed work; Making transparent the roles and processes involved in group-based assessment activities; Being explicit about how students are expected to act on feedback they receive – recognising that this is also takes time and learning effort.

[Online assessment](https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/embrace-digital/staff/assessments/) has become the predominant mode for assessment delivery, and inevitably this influences assessment design decisions. Alternative assessments, in lieu of exams, will normally take the form of an open book exam paper that students will complete at home over a restricted period of time (e.g. 24 hours). It is important that the student understands how much time they are expected to spend on their work.

Of paramount importance is that all assessment design adheres to guidance for [accessibility and inclusion](https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/embrace-digital/staff/accessibility--inclusion/).

References

Bloxham, S., and Boyd, P. (2007) *Developing Effective Assessment in Higher Education: A Practical Guide.* Maidenhead: Open University Press

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Nicol, D. (2010). From monologue to dialogue: Improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education,* *35*(5), 501-517.

QAA (2018) UK Quality Code, advice and guidance: assessment. Available from: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/assessment> (last accessed 14 August 2021)

Ulster University (2018) [Assessment workload equivalence guide](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/315057/Assessment-workload-equivalence-guide-revised-2018.pdf). Centre for Higher Education Research & Practice

Villarroel, V., Bloxham, S., Bruna, D., Bruna, C. and Herrera-Seda, C. (2017). Authentic assessment: creating a blueprint for course design, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(5), 840-854.

Reference points and guidance from other HEIs, including: [Leeds Beckett University](https://teachlearn.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/teaching-and-learning/assessment/#word-count-guidance); [University College Dublin](https://www.ucd.ie/teaching/t4media/assessment_workload_equivalences.pdf); [Manchester Metropolitan University](http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/ltia/issue17/fielding.php)

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