



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

# University of Birmingham Assessment Load Guidance

# Assessment Load Guidance

Assessment is an important part of learning and is integral to the student experience. Assessment should be appropriately varied and a valid measurement of the module and/or programme learning outcomes, as well as being authentic to the discipline. This guidance is designed to aid staff when planning the assessment on their programmes and modules and to promote consistency in assessment load. It aligns with the UoB Assessment & Feedback Principles and the Code of Practice on Taught Programme and Module Assessment and Feedback; and Colleges may choose to provide further guidance to aid local interpretation, taking account of disciplinary nuances and subject benchmark statements.

The assessment load guidance is indicative only and should not be interpreted as a prescriptive approach towards determining assessment methods. All decisions regarding assessment should have a clear rationale that is shared with students. Assessment which is significantly out of line with this guidance should be agreed locally as part of the programme and module development and approval processes.

## Summary: key considerations when determining appropriate assessment load:

**Student Effort:** assessment word counts, durations and equivalents are used as a proxy for overall student effort. Student effort includes preparation, planning and production of assessment, and these elements may vary according to type of assessment, discipline, level and an individual student's approach to the task. The preparatory work involved in beginning each individual piece of assessment should be taken into account where there is more than one piece of summative assessment. Information about workload expectations should be communicated to students alongside the rationale for assessment.

**Maximum Loads:** overall assessment word counts, durations and equivalents represent a recommended maximum or upper limit. Assessments should be designed to support student learning; therefore, assessment lengths may be below the upper limit if this is deemed appropriate by the programme/module lead and agreed locally.

**Discipline-led:** this guidance is provided to maintain general consistency in relation to common types of assessment. However, it is not intended to be prescriptive, and it is recognised that there may be variation according to discipline, level and type of assessment. Determining assessment load is only part of holistic assessment design and should be considered within the context of the overall programme assessment strategy. Colleges may provide further detail on how to interpret the guidance to aid local interpretation. There may also be PSRB requirements which must be met.



## Assessment Load Guidance

It is useful to consider the following when planning assessment:

### Student Effort

- Based on accepted sector norms, 1 credit requires on average 10 hours of notional learning hours for a typical student (so, 10-credits  $\approx$  100 hours; 20-credits  $\approx$  200 hours and so on). Notional learning hours include contact hours, independent study, formative and summative assessment. How best to apply notional hours of learning to a range of learning experiences will differ according to types of delivery, learning outcomes and student cohorts but is an important consideration when developing modules and programmes.

### Learning Outcomes

- It is suggested that 4-5 learning outcomes for a 20-credit module and 2-3 learning outcomes for a 10-credit module would be reasonable. All learning outcomes must be summatively assessed.

### Number of Assessments

- It is suggested that there are no more than 2-3 pieces of summative assessment for a 20-credit module and no more than 2 pieces of summative assessment for a 10-credit module.
- All modules should offer formative assessment opportunities. It might sometimes be appropriate for a module to have a single piece of in-course assessment and in this case it is strongly recommended that it is meaningfully divided into stages with opportunities for feedback and development/scaffolded support built in.
- For some subjects, several short assessments (for example, 1-2% each) may be used cumulatively to make up 10-20% of a module mark. This might include weekly quizzes, tutorial sheets or assessed participation. Appropriate moderation would still be expected as outlined in the Code of Practice on External Examining.

### Assessment Design

- Assessment design and variety should be considered at the programme level.
  - Assessments should be developed coherently across the programme, paying attention to how students are supported to develop skills iteratively as they progress through the levels of study, whilst recognising that students also value a level of consistency that enables them to develop and use feedback to improve over time.
  - Integrated programme assessment (synoptic assessment) is permissible and encouraged, where appropriate. This may include individual modules within a programme assessed together to support longitudinal learning, or a more extensive restructuring of teaching and assessment across the programme. The guidance for determining appropriate assessment workload also applies to integrated programme assessment.
- Accessibility and inclusivity should be considered as part of assessment design. It is suggested that equivalence of assessment load be considered as part of any alternative assessment arrangements.



## Traditional on-campus timed 'closed book' and 'open book' examinations

- Where exams to be taken under controlled conditions are deemed necessary, they should not normally contribute >50% to the overall module mark. There may be exceptions to this if there are PSRB requirements or specific pedagogic reasons, but in these cases it is not expected that any one exam will contribute >80% to the overall module mark. Students should not normally sit more than two exams in the January assessment period.
- Where a module includes examinations, the weighting needs to reflect the effort involved in preparation as well as in sitting the exam itself. The duration of the exam does not necessarily reflect the extent of revision required due to a variety of factors such as the number of questions, the number of learning outcomes covered, and the level of work assessed in the exam. Therefore, staff are encouraged to use their judgement when ascribing weighting to an exam.

## Assessment Load and Equivalents

We have a responsibility to ensure that assessment loads are broadly comparable across modules that have the same credit value. Previously, assessment load has been defined by either duration or word count. As assessments become more diverse and authentic these measures may be less applicable, and it is important to recognise student effort does not necessarily correlate with assignment length. More preparation may be required, for example, if a student is learning a new skill or finding an appropriate digital tool for a media production assessment. Consideration of student effort is, therefore, a key element of assessment design. Table 1 provides guidance on assessment equivalents for different types of assessment. **Note that these are recommended maximum values and are not intended to be prescriptive.** Staff are encouraged to use their judgement when it comes to expected student effort, especially for less common formats not covered in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Maximum\* assessment load for different types of assessment**

The assessment output is assumed to be 100% of the module mark except for traditional on-campus timed 'closed book' and 'open book' examinations (controlled condition exams).

Equivalent Assessments					
Credit	Essay (words)	Exam (controlled conditions)** (hours)	Technical / non text-based report (pages)	Individual Oral Presentation*** (minutes)	Media production (e.g. video or podcast) (minutes)
10	2000	2	6	15	5
20	4000	3	16	20	15
40 (dissertation/ project)	10,000	n/a	20	n/a	n/a
60 (Master's Level)	15,000	n/a	40	n/a	n/a

\*These lengths are the recommended **maximum**, and do not include supplementary information such as bibliographies and references; however, individual disciplines may choose to include these within word limits when designing assessment. Load may also vary considerably where work is completed, for example, in a foreign language or for Foundation level assessments.

\*\* Traditional on-campus timed 'closed book' and 'open book' examinations will not normally represent 100% of the module mark.

\*\*\*Presentations of more than 20-minutes are not recommended. The inclusion of Q&A or a viva within the time limit would be up to local discretion.

## Online, fixed time period exams and assessments

In online, fixed time period exams and assessments, it is recommended that students work on a task for a maximum of eight hours in any 24-hour period. It is suggested that the focus is on student effort (not the total time open) with guidance provided to students on word length (or equivalent) at a discipline level.

## Group Work (presentations and assignments)

Group assignments should not normally be considered a multiple of the individual assignment length, or the equivalent assignment load shared equally between the number of students, as this neglects the workload associated with team interactions. For example, an individual presentation of 5 minutes would not automatically become a four-person presentation of 20 minutes, and a 2000-word assignment for 1 person will not automatically become a 500-word assignment for each member of a four-person group. It is suggested that group assignments be of similar length to individual assignments or slightly longer, if appropriate.

## Practical Exams and Assessments

It is recognised that practical exams and assessments (e.g. drama or musical performances, lab based tests or OSCEs) vary considerably and it is therefore difficult to provide general guidance. These should be considered at discipline level and Colleges may wish to provide further information in local guidance.

## Assessment Combinations

It is important to consider the number and combination of assessments within a module to ensure we are not over-assessing our students. When combining assessments, the preparatory work involved in beginning each individual piece of assessment should be considered; two 2000-word essays would have a higher associated workload than one 4000-word essay (for both the student and programme/module lead). Table 1 provides the maximum assessment load for different types of assessment and assumes that the assessment output will be 100% of the module mark (except for traditional on-campus timed 'closed book' and 'open book' exams examinations). This guidance recommends that overall student effort is considered (including preparatory work), but programme/module leads have autonomy when designing assessment and combinations.

The following examples show potential combinations for a 20-credit module:

- 2500-word essay **plus** 5-minute oral presentation
- 1000-word essay **plus** 500-word essay **plus** 5-minute individual oral presentation
- 2000-word essay **plus** 90 minute exam
- 2500-word essay **plus** 1000-word essay

These examples are purely illustrative and programme/module leads can determine assessment load as appropriate and as part of their overall programme assessment strategy.

### Further Guidance on Assessment Design:

[Higher Education Futures Institute \(HEFI\) Assessment Support Hub](#)  
[University Codes of Practice, Policy, and Guidance](#)

