

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

GUIDANCE ON ASSESSMENT LOAD

1. Assessment Guidance

- 1.1. 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 [Birmingham Standards on Assessment and Feedback](#) and the [Code of Practice on Taught Programme and Module Assessment and Feedback](#). Colleges may choose to provide further guidance to aid local interpretation, taking account of disciplinary difference and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) [Subject Benchmark Statements](#).
- 1.2. The assessment load guidance is indicative only and should not be interpreted as a prescriptive approach towards determining assessment methods. All decisions regarding assessment within a module should also consider the programme and have a clear rationale related to learning outcomes that is shared with students. Assessment which is out of line with this guidance should be agreed locally as part of the programme and module development and approval processes.

Key considerations when determining appropriate assessment loads:

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 considered 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 (Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body) requirements which must be met.

2. Assessment Load Guidance

It is useful to consider the following when planning assessment:

2.1. 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.

- When applying notional hours to an apprenticeship, off-the-job hours calculations should only be based on what is considered to be 'new learning', in accordance with the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) funding rules. This means that off-the-job hours should not include activities such as examinations and other on-programme assessments linked to a qualification, or any training required for the programme but not specifically the Apprenticeship Standard. Off-the-job hours calculations for apprentices are therefore likely to be lower than the notional learning hours for a typical (non-apprentice) student. Each academic School or Department should consider tailoring calculations to their programme when confirming agreed planned off-the-job hours per module.

2.2. Learning Outcomes

- It is recommended 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.

2.3. Number of Assessments

- It is recommended 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 built-in opportunities for feedback and development/scaffolded support.
- 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](#). Where multiple markers grade student work the University's [Guidance for Staff on Moderation](#) should be consulted to ensure consistency and fairness.

2.4. 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.
- Recent advances in, and the availability of, generative AI technologies mean such tools have the potential to be increasingly used by students within the completion of their assessments. This necessitates careful consideration of assessment design to ensure that where generative AI tools might be used by learners, their use is responsible, and the contribution of the individual learner to the work can be clearly demonstrated.
- All assessments and assessment types should be reviewed on an annual basis to explore the potential implications of generative AI technologies. Grading schemes should be revised accordingly to recognise and reward the human skills and knowledge that generative AI currently finds difficult to replicate.
- Some assessment types are inherently more vulnerable to the effects of generative AI tools than others. **Particularly vulnerable are online non-invigilated examinations** which typically contain a significant proportion of short answer (open response) questions involving the recall of knowledge

or basic knowledge application. **The use of online non-invigilated examinations within the assessment process is therefore now permitted by exception only and following prior approval from the College Director of Education and the Deputy PVC for Education Policy and Academic Standards.**

- The [University's Framework on Generative AI and its Role Within Teaching, Learning and Assessment](#) along with the [Birmingham Standards on Generative AI](#) should be consulted.
- Further [detailed guidance on the role of generative AI tools within assessments and assessment design](#) is available to provide support in responding to the challenges and opportunities they afford.
- 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.

2.5. 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 such 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 examination 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 examination.
- To ensure consistency, examinations should adopt as standard one of the University's four agreed durations: 1 hour, 1 hour 30 minutes, 2 hours, or 3 hours. Students with RAPs (Reasonable Adjustment Plans) allowing additional time are permitted differing durations.

3. Assessment Load and Equivalents

- 3.1. 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.
- 3.2. 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.

3.3. 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	15	20	15
30	7,500	3	18	20	20
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.

3.4. 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.

3.5. Practical Exams and Assessments

It is recognised that practical exams and assessments (e.g. drama or musical performances, lab-based tests or OSCEs (Observed Structured Clinical Examinations)) 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.

4. Assessment Combinations

4.1. 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.

4.2. The following examples show some 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 examination.
- 2500-word essay **plus** 1000-word essay

4.3. These examples are purely illustrative and programme/module leads can determine assessment load as appropriate and as part of their overall programme assessment strategy, in line with the guidance / table found in section 3.3.

Further Guidance on Assessment Design:

[Assessment Resources \(Educational Development Team\)](#)

[Assessment Support Hub](#)

[University Codes of Practice, Policy, and Guidance](#)