

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

**PRINCIPLES ON ASSESSMENT AND ASSESSMENT LOAD: UNDERGRADUATE AND
POSTGRADUATE TAUGHT PROVISION**

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This guidance sets out a series of expectations and principles for summative assessment volume and effort across undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes. Its purpose is to support consistency, fairness, inclusivity, and transparency in assessment design, while allowing justified variation across disciplines.
- 1.2. Summative assessment load refers to the total expected student effort associated with completing a summative task, including preparation, production, and submission, rather than the output format or word count alone. Aligning assessment load appropriately with credit value ensures parity across modules, supports student learning and progression, and helps avoid over-assessment. While this guidance focuses on summative assessment, formative assessment is expected to be embedded as part of effective assessment design and so is also addressed here.
- 1.3. Assessment should be designed at the programme level, not just the module level, to ensure a coherent balance of assessment types, timings, and workload. While structural constraints such as shared or optional modules may limit full alignment in some cases, programme teams are encouraged to consider equivalence of effort across formats, drawing on benchmarks and indicative maxima to ensure consistency. The guidance also supports the development of varied, authentic, and resilient assessment strategies that promote assured learning, in response to changing pedagogical and technological contexts.
- 1.4. Programme-level assessment strategies may also include synoptic elements that span more than one module or draw together learning from across a level or year. While modular structures can pose challenges to embedding programme-wide assessment, one approach is to align synoptic tasks to the credit weighting of contributing modules, ensuring assessment load remains proportionate and clearly defined. [Further guidance on designing and crediting synoptic assessment, including models for implementing programme-level assessment within modular structures, is available.](#)

2. Principles of Assessment Load

- 2.1 Assessment load should be:

- **Aligned to learning outcomes:** Assessment methods should be selected based on their fitness for evaluating intended learning outcomes. Assessment load expectations should then be used to calibrate the scale and scope of the task appropriately.
- **Proportionate to credit value:** A 20-credit module represents approximately 200 hours of total student effort. The portion of this effort dedicated to summative assessment should be consistent across modules.
- **Designed to reflect academic progression:** Assessment tasks should normally reflect increasing complexity and independence across levels of study, aligned to Bloom's taxonomy. While this progression supports deeper learning, it is recognised that some modules may introduce new disciplinary content at higher levels, and assessment design should remain appropriate to the learning context.
- **Effort-equivalent across formats:** Different assessment types (for example, essays, presentations, media tasks) should be calibrated to require broadly comparable levels of student effort.
- **Coherently distributed:** No module should place a significantly higher or lower assessment burden on students compared to others of equivalent size and level, and assessment load should be scheduled at a programme level to avoid unnecessary bunching across the academic

year, in line with the expectations set out in Section 2.9 of the *Code of Practice on Taught Programme and Module Assessment and Feedback*.

- **Formatively scaffolded:** All modules must include at least one formative assessment / feedback opportunity aligned with the summative task(s). Formative assessment is a required feature of effective module design and should normally include feedback from teaching staff or structured peer review. Where a module includes only one summative assessment component, such as a 100% exam or single written task, formative opportunities are essential and must be embedded in the module design.
- **Inclusive for learners:** Assessment methods should enable all students to demonstrate achievement of the intended learning outcomes, using formats that reflect the diversity of the student cohort and remove unnecessary barriers to success.

3. Indicative Assessment Load by Credit and Level

- 3.1. Assessment load should be defined by the total student effort required to complete a task, not by output alone. A typical expectation is that 20 - 35% of a module's notional hours will be spent preparing for and completing summative assessments, equivalent to 40 - 70 hours for a 20-credit module, depending on level and task complexity. This includes all stages of engagement such as planning, researching, analysing, drafting, editing, rehearsing, and delivery. This range is indicative rather than prescriptive; some assessment types (for example, unseen examinations or performances) may fall slightly below it, while others (for example, extended projects) may sit towards the upper end.
- 3.2. While word counts and durations can provide useful reference points, they are not precise indicators of effort. A concise analytical task may require more time than a longer descriptive one. In many disciplines, including those in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, the health and medical sciences, creative arts, or practice-based subjects, assessment outputs such as lab reports, artefacts, OSCEs, or performances may bear little relation to word-based equivalents. The key principle therefore is equivalence of effort across formats and across modules of similar size.
- 3.3. Assessment load expectations should be proportionate to credit value, and the number of summative components should be minimised to support depth of learning; as a general guide, modules should normally include no more than two summative assessments per 20 credits, and no more than three unless pedagogically justified.
- 3.4. Table 1 (below) sets out **maximum expectations** for a range of assessment formats by credit size. The preparation time ranges reflect increasing expectations of complexity and independence as students progress through their studies. See Section 4 for further guidance on how cognitive challenge and student autonomy evolve across levels.
- 3.5. **Table 1 – Assessment Preparation Benchmarks by Credit Value**
(on next page)

Credit Value	Preparation Time (hours)	Maximum number of components	Essay / Written Task	Technical Report	Exam Duration (hours)	Presentation	Technical or Creative Output (poster, model, prototype, artwork, etc.)	Media Production	Portfolio / Reflective Work
20	40 - 70	2 (3 if justified)	4,000 words	~15 pages	2 hrs	20 - 25 mins	2 artefacts	10 mins	6,000
30	60 - 105	3	6,000 words	~20 pages	3 hrs	25 - 30 mins	3 artefacts	12 - 15 mins	8,000
40	80 - 140	3	8,000 words	~30 pages	3 hrs	30 mins	Substantial	15 mins	10,000
60	120 - 210	4	12,000 words	~50 pages	3 hrs	30 mins	Substantial	15 - 20 mins	12,000

Table 1: Assessment Preparation Benchmarks by Credit Value. Indicative maximum expectations for assessment formats are shown by credit size. Preparation time is presented as a range to reflect increasing levels of complexity, independence, and critical engagement as students progress through their studies. Word counts, durations, and supervision hours represent typical maxima. Where a module includes multiple summative components, the overall assessment load should remain proportionate to credit value and aligned with learning outcomes, rather than simply divided by weighting; some assessment formats (such as presentations or media tasks) are more typically used in combination with core components rather than as standalone tasks.

3.6. Notes on Assessment Equivalents:

- **Assessment effort increases with level.** While maximum word counts or durations remain consistent across levels, the effort required to complete a task typically increases as students progress through their studies. This reflects rising expectations for independence, criticality, synthesis, and originality. See Section 4 for further guidance on how assessment challenge progresses across levels.
- **Large-credit modules** (for example, projects or dissertations) may include multiple summative components (for example, a report and a presentation), provided the **total student effort remains proportionate to the credit weighting** and each component has a clear, distinct purpose.
- **Splitting assessments increases total effort.** Dividing one larger task into multiple smaller ones does not reduce student workload. Each additional task requires separate planning and preparation. For example, two 2,000-word essays will generally require more effort than a single 4,000-word task. Total assessment load should reflect this and remain proportionate to credit. Some formats, such as essays, examinations, and portfolios, are typically suitable as standalone assessments. Others, such as presentations, media outputs, and creative artefacts, are more often used in combination with a core task. Where an assessment format is used as a component rather than the sole task, its expected preparation time and output should be scaled proportionately to its weighting within the overall module assessment. See Section 3.9 for worked examples illustrating how assessment components can be combined and scaled proportionately.
- **Low-stakes tasks.** Small-scale assessments (for example, weekly quizzes or tutorial problems worth ≤5%) may be used in a formative or low-weighted summative way to scaffold student learning. Where multiple low-weighted tasks are used, they should not normally exceed 10% of the

module total, and may be excluded from the formal component count, provided they are clearly aligned with learning outcomes and expected student effort hours are moderated appropriately.

- **Structured assessments.** Where multiple outputs are stages of a single, developmental task (for example, chapter-based reports, patchwork essays, or cumulative portfolios), these may be treated as a single assessment component if they are sequentially scaffolded and not initiated as standalone assignments. These differ from low-stakes tasks in that they collectively form the full summative assessment.
- **Word counts** exclude references, appendices, and bibliographies unless otherwise specified. They represent **maximum output lengths** and should not be used as direct proxies for effort.
- **Technical or non-text-based reports** may be measured in pages (excluding appendices and references) where this better suits disciplinary norms. This format may be more appropriate for STEMM or professional documentation tasks, and typically accommodates technical diagrams, figures, tables, and code extracts where relevant.
- **Presentation durations** increase by credit value up to a typical maximum of 30 minutes. Additional complexity or credit weighting at higher levels is usually reflected in other components (for example, written reports or portfolios), not extended presentation time.
- **Standard exam durations.** Where closed-book or open-book exams are used under controlled conditions, the duration should normally be set at one of the University's four standard durations: 1 hour, 1 hour 30 minutes, 2 hours, or 3 hours. This supports timetabling consistency and ensures equitable application of Reasonable Adjustment Plans (RAPs). These durations represent upper limits for individual examinations by credit value. Where a module includes an exam as one of several summative components, the exam length should be scaled appropriately to ensure that the combined assessment effort remains within the expected 40 - 70 hour range for a 20-credit module.
- **Media productions** include live-action videos, screencasts, podcasts, or animations. Final duration is a maximum; expected preparation and production time will vary depending on complexity.
- **Group work** should account for the time students spend coordinating, planning, and negotiating roles. Total effort should not be calculated by dividing the output evenly across group members. A typical guide is to allow **individual-equivalent effort plus approximately 20%**, to reflect collaboration time. Assessment should balance group outcomes with opportunities for individual contribution.
- **Technical or creative outputs** may include posters, physical models, design portfolios, prototypes, software artefacts, or other discipline-specific work. These should be **scaled in relation to the credit value and expected student effort**, not just physical size or duration.
- **Portfolios/Reflective Work** includes cumulative tasks such as journals, annotated artefacts, or structured reflections. These formats often unfold across the term and may combine text with other evidence of learning. Word limits reflect the total indicative maximum and assume sustained engagement rather than one-off submission. While the final portfolio is typically submitted as a single summative piece, earlier components may be used for formative feedback and revision, helping to build towards the final submission.

Supervision for Projects and Dissertations

- 3.7. Supervision for large-credit assessment components (such as dissertations or final projects) is an important part of the student experience, though not part of the summative assessment load itself. Supervision also plays a critical formative role, supporting students to plan, refine, and improve their work in line with the assessment criteria and learning outcomes. Supervision may be delivered through a combination of individual and group meetings. Where group supervision is used, there must still be clear provision for individualised feedback and progress monitoring. While models vary across disciplines, students should normally expect structured support aligned to the expectations of the assessment task. This support may include feedback on draft elements, progress updates, or research plans, where appropriate to the level and format. Supervision is normally delivered in person, unless there is a clear rationale for an alternative mode. This helps to ensure consistency of experience, maintain engagement, and support academic community-building.
- 3.8. While supervision volume will vary depending on the nature of the project and disciplinary norms, students undertaking substantial assessment components (for example, 40- or 60-credit modules) should normally expect a structured programme of support, typically comprising between 8-12 hours and 12-18 hours of supervision respectively.

Worked Examples

- 3.9. The following examples illustrate how assessment combinations can be designed within the expectations set out in Table 1. They show how preparation time might be distributed across different types of summative tasks, and how formative opportunities can be used to scaffold student learning effectively. These examples assume typical Level C or I expectations; at higher levels, students would be expected to demonstrate increased independence, criticality, and originality in the same formats. See Section 4 for further detail on how assessment expectations progress by level.

Example A: 20-credit module with two assessment components (coursework and presentation)

- **Summative Tasks:**
 - 2,500-word analytical report (≈14 hours planning, 16 hours writing) submitted in Week 9.
 - 5-minute individual presentation (≈10 hours preparation and rehearsal) submitted in Week 11.
- **Total estimated effort:** ~40 hours.
- **Formative element:** Presentation rehearsal with peer and tutor feedback in Week 6.
- **Design note:** Tasks target distinct learning outcomes and are staggered to reduce workload bunching. Use of pre-recorded video presentations enables scalable delivery while maintaining opportunities for feedback. The formative stage supports student confidence and helps reduce assessment anxiety.

Example B: 20-credit module with a single written assessment (100%)

- **Summative Task:**
 - 4,000-word case study report (≈25 hours planning and research, 25 hours writing and revision).
- **Total estimated effort:** ~50 hours.
- **Formative element:** Annotated bibliography and outline submitted mid-semester with tutor feedback.

- **Design note:** High-stakes single assessment is scaffolded by a structured formative stage aligned with the summative task.

Example C: 20-credit module with 100% exam

- **Summative Task:**
 - 2-hour closed-book examination (\approx 40 hours revision, 2 hours examination time).
- **Total estimated effort:** \approx 42 hours.
- **Formative element:** In-class mock exam under timed conditions, with individual tutor feedback provided at least three weeks before the final examination.
- **Design note:** Modules assessed solely by examination must include at least one opportunity for students to practise under exam conditions and receive meaningful feedback.

Example D: 30-credit module with mixed-mode assessment

- **Summative Tasks:**
 - 2,500-word essay (\approx 8 hours planning, 10 hours writing).
 - 10-minute video screencast (\approx 7 hours planning/storyboarding, 8 hours production and editing).
 - Reflective journal (\approx 25 hours across term, including planning and drafting time).
- **Total estimated effort:** \approx 60 hours.
- **Formative element:** Feedback on journal entries provided bi-weekly; screencast draft peer reviewed during seminar session.
- **Design note:** Reflective tasks accumulate gradually; formative check-ins reduce cognitive load and support sustained student task engagement. Each component targets distinct learning outcomes, and the effort is deliberately distributed across different formats to balance cognitive demand.

Example E: 20-credit module with group-based project and individual reflection

- **Summative Tasks:**
 - Group project report (10,000 words total / 2,500 words per student) \approx 30 hours for planning and writing + 6 hours collaboration time (\approx 36 hours total).
 - Individual critical reflection (1,000 words; \approx 10 hours).
- **Total estimated effort per student:** \approx 46 hours
- **Formative element:** Mid-project check-in with project advisor; peer feedback on reflection outline.
- **Design note:** The group task includes time for coordination and negotiation, with effort calculated as individual-equivalent plus \approx 20% to reflect collaboration. The individual reflection ensures each student demonstrates personal engagement with the project outcomes.

4. Progression in Assessment Expectations by Level

- 4.1. Assessment should increase in the level of cognitive challenge and student independence as learners progress through their studies. This reflects the development of academic skills, critical thinking, and disciplinary confidence, as well as the graduate attributes and transferable skills required for employability and further study.
- 4.2. Although the maximum outputs for assessments (for example, word counts, durations) may remain stable across levels, the cognitive demand, independence, and preparation time required to meet those outputs increases significantly. Students at higher levels are expected to engage more deeply with literature, demonstrate critical synthesis, and produce work with greater independence,

originality, and disciplinary nuance. This progression is reflected in the guidance on preparation time, which should be interpreted in relation to both credit value and level of study.

Table 2 – Cognitive Characteristics of Assessment by Level of Study

Level	Typical Cognitive Focus	Examples of Assessment Characteristics
Level C	Foundation and understanding	Structured tasks focused on recall, explanation, and application of core concepts. Strong scaffolding and early formative feedback.
Level I	Application and analysis	Greater independence in applying knowledge to familiar and unfamiliar contexts. Tasks begin to require comparison and evaluation.
Level H	Critical evaluation and synthesis	Integration of knowledge, constructing independent arguments, evaluating sources and approaches.
Level M	Originality and advanced synthesis	Research-informed or practice-based tasks requiring sustained critical insight, originality, and autonomy.

Table 2: Cognitive Characteristics of Assessment by Level of Study. *Typical expectations for summative assessments at each level are summarised, offering a guide for designing tasks that ensure progression, appropriate challenge, and alignment with intended learning outcomes. The worked examples in Section 3.9 illustrate typical Level C/I configurations; programme teams should adjust expectations accordingly for Level H or M modules.*

5. Programme-Level Assessment Design

- 5.1. Assessment should be designed at the programme level to ensure coherence, progression, and a balanced distribution of effort across modules and the academic year. A programme-level approach supports fairness, academic integrity, and high-quality learning by aligning assessment methods, timings, and feedback opportunities, and by ensuring students can develop and demonstrate transferable skills and graduate attributes relevant to future study or employment. Discipline-specific variations are expected, but significant deviations from the benchmarks in Table 1 must be pedagogically justified.
- 5.2. The following principles set out core programme-level expectations for assessment and feedback:
 - Assessment strategies should be designed at programme level before finalising individual module assessments, ensuring a coherent spread of assessment types and timings across the academic year. Formative opportunities should be in-built to scaffold student learning and prepare them effectively for summative tasks. A programme-level approach also helps ensure that students can demonstrate assured learning at key stages and engage with a broad mix of assessment types, including project work, presentations, critical reflection, and group tasks, that support the development of graduate attributes and employability skills.
 - It is permissible for individual modules to be assessed entirely by examination where pedagogically appropriate. However, at the programme level, the overall assessment profile for each year of study should normally include at least 40-50% of credits assessed through a range of continuous assessment (for example, coursework, portfolios, projects). This ensures that while some modules may be examination-only, students experience a balanced and inclusive mix of assessment types across the year.
 - Programme teams should review assessment strategies annually to consider how they support assured learning, particularly in the context of evolving generative AI tools. Assessment methods should enable students to demonstrate their individual understanding and achievement

of learning outcomes in ways that are authentic, meaningful, and not easily replicable by AI. The University's [Framework on Generative AI](#) and the [Birmingham Standards on Generative AI](#) should be used to inform design choices.

- Programmes are expected to ensure that at least 40 discrete credits per year (for example, two 20-credit modules) are assessed using methods that are resilient to the challenges posed by generative AI technologies. These should be modules where the assessment design enables an individual student's contribution to be clearly demonstrated. This may include, but is not limited to, supervised assessments, live performances, practical demonstrations, reflective or iterative portfolios, and authentic, context-specific tasks, or well-structured group work with identifiable individual inputs. Where assessments present potential vulnerabilities to generative AI, programme teams should document appropriate mitigation strategies.
- Flexibility in assessment design is encouraged, provided that the balance of assessment methods supports student learning, integrity, progression, and the closing of awarding gaps.

5.3 Further good practice in programme-level assessment design includes:

- Prioritising authenticity, relevance, and engagement, by using formats that reflect real-world disciplinary practice.
- Including formative stages that model or scaffold summative tasks, such as drafts, exemplars, or structured peer review. This is particularly important where a module has only one summative assessment, in which case formative opportunities should be embedded and not left optional.
- Supporting students in managing assessment effort.
- Limiting over-assessment: Modules should normally include no more than two summative components per 20 credits, and no more than three if pedagogically justified. Where additional assessment points are being considered, programme teams should reflect on whether some elements could be delivered formatively instead. The workload should be proportionate to the weighting and purpose of each task. There is no restriction on the number of formative components, provided they are appropriately scheduled, purposeful, and support student learning.
- Linking across modules: Where appropriate, assessments may build on or connect to tasks from earlier modules to support progressive skill development, reduce duplication, and reinforce programme-level coherence.
- Synoptic assessments across more than one module may be used to support integrative learning, provided the combined assessment load is proportionate to the total credit value and each module's contribution is clearly defined. Synoptic assessments should be carefully coordinated across module teams to ensure clarity and fairness.
- Designing for inclusion: Assessment should be accessible and meaningful to all students, including those with disabilities, neurodiverse learners, and students from different educational or cultural backgrounds. Inclusive assessment design reduces the need for individual adjustments by anticipating variation in student needs and should be developed in alignment with the University's guidance on reasonable adjustments and inclusive practice.
- Accessing support and resources: Programme teams are encouraged to consult the University's [A-Z of Assessment Types](#) and engage with the Educational Development Team when designing new assessments or reviewing existing ones.

5.4 Assessment load must be justified, proportionate, and aligned to learning outcomes, supporting high-quality student learning without overburdening either students or staff.

Further Guidance on Assessment Design:

[Assessment Resources \(Educational Development Team\)](#)
[Assessment Support Hub](#)
[University Codes of Practice, Policy, and Guidance](#)