Assessment Load Guidance

This guidance is intended to assist staff in designing assessments for their programmes and modules, to aim for an appropriate level of consistency in the workload and experience of students.

This guidance on assessment workload serves as a reference and is not a rigid framework for determining assessment methods. Decisions about assessment should be supported by a clear rationale, which should be communicated to students. If an assessment significantly deviates from this guidance, it should be reviewed and approved locally as part of the development and approval process for programmes and modules.

Defining Assessment Load and Assessment Weighting

Assessment load refers to the total effort students are expected to invest in completing assessments for a particular module or programme. This includes activities like preparation, research, writing, and revising, as well as the time required to undertake the assessment itself (e.g., exams, essays, or projects). The assessment load is often measured in terms of:

- **Word counts:** for written assignments.
- **Durations:** for timed assessments like exams or presentations.
- **Equivalents:** for tasks like projects, group work, or creative outputs.

Assessment load is typically aligned with the credit value of a module, with guidelines indicating how many hours of student effort are expected for each credit (e.g., 1 credit ≈ 10 hours of learning, including assessment).

Research on students' experiences of assessment identifies four features of assessment which comprise assessment load from the perspective of students: 1) The volume of **summative assessment**; 2) The volume of **formative assessment**; 3) The proportion of **assessment by examination**; and 4) The number of **different types** of assessment. The latter is important because too many different types of task can add to assessment load by requiring more time from students to understand the instructions and expected standards (Jessop & Tomas, 2017; Tomas and Jessop, 2018).

Assessment weighting determines how much each assessment contributes to the final grade for a module or programme. It is usually expressed as a percentage and reflects the relative importance of different tasks. For example:

- A module might have two assessments, e.g., one essay weighted at 40% and an exam weighted at 60%.
- In a programme, different modules contribute differently to the final classification (e.g., 35% from FHEQ5, 65% from FHEQ6).

Weighting ensures that the complexity and significance of each assessment are appropriately reflected in the overall grade calculation, balancing the distribution of effort across multiple assessments or modules.

The importance of fairness and consistency

Seeking consistency in **assessment load** and **weighting** across modules is crucial for several reasons:

1. Fairness and Equity

- Students expect a comparable level of effort and challenge across modules with the same credit value. Inconsistent assessment loads can create perceptions of unfairness, where some modules feel disproportionately demanding or lenient (Hailikari et al., 2014; Jessop et al., 2014).
- Consistency in weighting ensures that assessments contribute equitably to the overall grade, reflecting their importance without disadvantaging students in specific modules.

2. Positive Student Experience

- Discrepancies in workload or weighting can lead to dissatisfaction and stress, negatively impacting students' academic experience. Fair assessment practices are often linked to better student engagement and well-being (Rasooli et al., 2023).
- A balanced approach to assessment across modules promotes a manageable workload and prevents burnout, particularly during peak assessment periods (Tomas and Jessop, 2018).

3. Alignment with Learning Outcomes

- Consistency ensures that all modules align with the programme's broader learning outcomes and credit-hour expectations. This fosters a cohesive educational experience, where effort and assessment are proportional to the intended learning goals.

4. Transparency and Communication

- Students are more likely to trust and value the assessment process if they perceive it as consistent and well-structured. Clear communication about workload and weighting reduces confusion and enhances understanding of academic expectations (Jessop et al., 2014).

5. Quality Assurance

- Ensuring consistency across modules reflects good academic practice and supports institutional standards for quality assurance. It demonstrates that the programme adheres to sector norms and principles of fairness in assessment.

Principles for decision-making about assessment load

When deciding on **assessment loads** and **assessment weightings**, the following principles are important to consider:

1. Alignment with Learning Outcomes

- Assessments should be designed to measure the intended learning outcomes of the module and some of the programme learning outcomes. The load and weighting should reflect the significance and complexity of those outcomes.

2. Student Effort and Workload

- Consider the time and effort required for students to complete the assessment, including preparation, research, and production. Ensure that the workload aligns with the credit value of the module (e.g., 1 credit ≈ 10 hours of notional learning).

3. Fairness and Equity

- Strive for consistency in workload and weighting across modules of the same level and credit value. Avoid significant discrepancies that might lead to perceptions of unfairness.

5. Feedback Opportunities

- Include opportunities for formative assessments and feedback to support student learning. Summative assessments should be balanced to avoid overloading students or staff at peak times.

6. Clarity and Transparency

- Clearly communicate the rationale for assessment load and weighting to students, explaining how they relate to the module's objectives and programme requirements.

7. Discipline-Specific Standards

- Consider the norms and expectations within the discipline. Some fields may require more extensive assessments or continuous evaluation, which should be appropriately weighted and justified.

8. Cohesion Across the Programme

- Take a programmatic view of assessment to ensure coherence and avoid redundancy or over-assessment. Assessment load and weighting should be part of an integrated strategy across all modules.

9. Regulatory and Institutional Guidelines

- Align with institutional policies and sector benchmarks for assessment practices, ensuring compliance with quality assurance standards and any requirements from professional, statutory, or regulatory bodies (PSRBs).

Calculating suggested assessment loads

Of the student workload hours for each module (e.g., 150 hours for a 15-credit module), a general rule of thumb is that around 20-30% of a student's time should be spent preparing for assessment. This is a notional figure, especially as it can be difficult to separate independent study time (e.g. reading or lab-work) from assessment time (i.e. where that reading or lab-work feeds into producing the assessment).

Based on these notional guidelines, in a 15-credit module, an assessment worth 100% of the module credits should involve 30 hours of student work (i.e., 20% of 150 hours), with these hours adjusted according to the assessment weighting (e.g., around 24 hours workload for a 75% weighting, 15 hours for a 50% weighting, and around 8 hours for a 25% weighting).

Depending on the nature of the assessment task, it is then possible to consider how these hours of student workload should influence the length or duration of the assessment.

NB: It is likely that the length of the assessment will differ according to level of study. For example, it would be unlikely that a Level 4 module would include a 3000 word essay, whereas as assignment of this length would be more appropriate at Level 6.

Appendix 1 contains a benchmarking tool which can be used as a starting point for making decisions about the length/duration of assessment dependent on the module credit value and the credit weighting of the assessment.

These values are **indicative only**, and should be the starting point for conversations as a programme team, also drawing upon guidance in the University's regulations and Codes of Practice, PSRB guidance, and conversations with external examiners.

References

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Jessop, T., & Tomas, C. (2017). The implications of programme assessment patterns for student learning. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *42*(6), 990-999.

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Acknowledgements: The University of Liverpool's *'Calculating student assessment workloads and equivalences'* guide was used as a starting point for populating the benchmarking tool.

Appendix 1: Assessment Load Benchmarking Tool

	Module Credit Value							
	15 Credits				30 credits			
	Assessment Weighting							
	100%	**75%**	**50%**	**25%**	**100%**	**75%**	**50%**	**25%**
Written Coursework								
Suggested word count (upper limit)	3000 words	2500 words	2000 words	1500 words	5000 words	4000 words	3000 words	2000 words
Corresponding student hours on task	30 hours	24 hours	15 hours	8 hours	60 hours	50 hours	30 hours	16 hours
Dissertation								
Suggested word count (upper limit)	10000 words				15000 words			
Corresponding student hours on task	60 hours				120 hours			
Coursework (not primarily written)[a]								
Suggested page count (upper limit)	20 pages	15 pages	10 pages	5 pages	40 pages	30 pages	20 pages	10 pages
Corresponding student hours on task	30 hours	24 hours	15 hours	8 hours	60 hours	50 hours	30 hours	16 hours
Invigilated exams[b, c]								
Suggested length (upper limit)	2 hours	2 hours	1.5 hours	1 hour	2 hours	2 hours	2 hours	2 hours
Corresponding student revision hours[d]	27 hours	22 hours	13.5 hours	7 hours	57 hours	47 hours	28 hours	14 hours
Presentations[e]								
Suggested length (upper limit)	15 mins	10 mins	7 mins	5 mins	30 mins	20 mins	15 mins	10 mins
Corresponding student hours on task	30 hours	24 hours	15 hours	8 hours	60 hours	50 hours	30 hours	16 hours

[a]e.g., document with some written content but also including a significant amount of diagrams, tables, infographics, drawings, lab results, portfolio, etc., where page count is more appropriate.

[b]For multiple-choice question (MCQ) examinations, a good rule of thumb when determining the number of questions is to allow 90 seconds per question, i.e. a 1 hour examination might have around 40 questions.

cThe typical length for invigilated examinations at the University of Surrey is 2 hours. Deviations from this length should be discussed with the appropriate Associate Head Education and Associate Dean Education.

[d]The suggested revision hours are based on the assumption that students have also kept up to date with all problem sheets, formative assessments, and lecture attendance.

[e]Some guidance suggests adding 20% to suggested length for group presentations to accommodate multiple contributions.

Appendix 2: Worked Example

Module: MAN3140

Assessment Pattern:

Assessment type	Unit of assessment	Weighting
Coursework	LEARNING BLOG (1400 WORDS)	50
Coursework	REPORT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RESTAURANT CHAIN (2,000 WORDS)	50

ASSIGNMENT 1

The first assignment is in the format of **two** blog posts. They should be short, sharp, relevant and interesting.

You should identify a topic that interests you from the lectures, external speakers, visits or trade press and write a blog of around 500 words exploring the topic. In addition you should write a separate commentary of around 200 words that reflects on the process of choosing the topic, the information gathering process, and the learning gained through the process.

You should present **two** blogs and commentaries on different topics i.e. 2 x 500 words and 2 x 200 words = 1,400 words.

ASSIGNMENT 2

For the second assignment, you should choose an established restaurant chain operation. You should then consider its development and current position against the theoretical framework of the service firm life cycle. You should identify any opportunities or issues that might face the business at this stage of its development.

Narrative:

These assessments are a good example because they do not constitute the 'typical' essay-style written coursework task and demonstrate creativity in assessment design.

This is a 15-credit module, with each piece of written coursework constituting 50% of the module mark.

	Module Cr			
	15 Credits			
	Assessment			
	100%	75%	50%	25%
Written Coursework				
Suggested word count (upper limit)	3000 words	2500 words	2000 words	1500 words
Corresponding student hours on task	30 hours	24 hours	15 hours	8 hours

The benchmarking tool would indicate that a suggested upper limit for the word count for each assignment would be 2000 words.

The Learning Blog assignment has a slightly shorter word count, due to the style of writing for this particular task requiring a more concise exposition of ideas. This demonstrates how the upper limit for the word count is just a guide, and can be nuanced to fit the specific nature of the assignment and the module.