CQSD
CENTRE FOR | QUALITY SUPPORT & DEVELOPMENT

University of Reading

FOCUS ON: ASSESSMENT & FEEDBACK

MAKING ASSESSMENT VOLUME AND DISTRIBUTION MANAGEABLE FOR STAFF AND STUDENTS

ASSESSMENT VOLUME AND DISTRIBUTION

When assessments are proportionate and distributed effectively students can commit properly to both formative and summative assessment, and staff have time to provide meaningful feedback.

Ensuring parity of student workload between modules that have the same credit weighting and avoiding assessment bunching necessitates co-ordination in design and delivery across the programme team. This guidance is to be used by programme teams in the design, delivery and enhancement of new and existing programmes and modules, as well as module convenors reflecting on how to ensure the workload and submission dates of their assessments are balanced and appropriate.

CONTEXT AND PARAMETERS

Across the sector, modularity has led to an increase in summative assessments, bunching of assessment deadlines and a reduction in formative learning opportunities. Consequently, summative assessments may be the only means by which academic staff feel they can engage students with their module. When modules compete for students' time and attention this engenders a surface approach to learning with some students adopting a tick-box mentality focusing on marks and not engaging in formative assessment opportunities (Harland et al., 2014; O'Neil, 2019; Tomas & Jessop, 2019).

> "*Negative consequences of deadline bunching are an in-built risk within the modular structure, in which subjects are taught discretely and learning is assessed at the end of each module. Unless explicitly addressed in design, it is almost inevitable that students will be asked to submit work for every module on dates that are close together.*" Hughes, G., et al. (2022). Education for Mental Health. Advance HE, p. 80

We outline below some key university policies which aim to redress the above.

Assessment volume

- There are limits to the number of summative assessment items in a module:
  - 20 credit modules should have 1 or 2 items of summative assessment, and no more than 3.
  - Modules that are 40 or more credits should have a minimum of two, but no more than four items of assessment.
- Split assessments are permitted for Group Work (e.g. group product plus an individual reflection) and count as one summative assessment item, with the proviso that: a) they are interconnected; and b) at least one element assesses individual contributions. This approach might also be adopted to allow students to reflect on the use of AI tools to develop an assessment.

> "*The volume of assessment massively impacts my learning. Whilst I understand that assessments are essential to contribute to my final grade, it then becomes extremely challenging to balance lecture work, extra reading with assessments, especially if you have numerous due within a short time frame. It gets to a point where you then have to abandon your lectures + extra reading in order to finish these assessments, and therefore, you do not learn anything*." University of Reading student, 2021.

Assessment distribution

- Modules are assessed in the semester in which they are taught. Modules which span semesters must have some summative assessment in Semester 1.
- Examinations must take place during the dedicated assessment period, all other assessment is evenly distributed throughout the module duration. It is expected that deadlines for in-person practicals, in-class tests, presentations and oral exams will be before the assessment period. This allows the assessment period to be used to schedule exams across the University and for coursework submissions.
- In class tests should be scheduled throughout the semester, not during the assessment period.
- Programme teams should work together to review the distribution of assessment deadlines to seek to minimise bunching of assessment deadlines. A tool has been developed which programme teams might like to use, to visualise the distribution of formative and summative assessment tasks.
- Schools should have a maximum number of assessment submissions in any one week so as not to overload students.

Formative assessment

Overarching principles: There should be an appropriate balance between formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment prepares students well for summative assessment. Feedback on assessment must feed forward. In addition:

- Schools must ensure that every student receives a minimum of one piece of formative or summative feedback prior to the winter vacation for each module taken during the first semester of their programme of study, preferably on an individual basis.

PARITY OF STUDENT WORKLOAD BETWEEN MODULES

Assessment volume relates not only to the number of assessments students submit but the associated workload and time required to complete them. Schools should plan for parity of student workload between modules that have the same credit weighting. Similarly, the workload should be commensurate with the assessment item's weighting within the module.

Student time on task: A good working rule of thumb is to allocate between 20 and 30% of a module's total hours to assessment.

Wordcount & equivalencies: At the University of Reading we are not prescriptive about word count, given this fails to recognise the complexity of the task or the time taken to complete it (e.g., writing a pithy 300-word abstract could take longer than a 1,000 word short essay, owing to challenge of creating concisely written work). Word count may also not be appropriate for all types of task – e.g., maths problems, performances. Word count is therefore usually accompanied by 'equivalences'. Having said that, when looking across the HE sector in the UK, there are some clear trends in the notional hours for assessment which are presented in Table 1. These hours do not include the hours spent on research and learning in preparation for assessments, this should be factored into the calculation of module hours when developing MDFs.

Additionally, our students are diverse and thus time taken to produce assessments will vary, however, students may benefit from some guidance on how long they should spend on assessments. This could include providing clear guidance about how much time students should spend preparing for (e.g. planning their approach, conducting research, revising etc.) and undertaking the exam or coursework, along with an indicative word count or equivalent measure of effort.

TASK TYPE	HOURS OF EFFORT
Report	10 hrs for 1,000 words
Essay	10 hrs for 1,000 words
Presentation	10 hours for 10 minutes presenting
Poster	10 hrs for 1 poster worth 10 credits
Reflective Blog	2,500 words for 10 hours
Group work	750 words over 10 hours
Exam	20 hrs revision for 2 hr exam
Solo and ensemble performances totalling 20 to 45 minutes	25 hours
A seminar presentation of 20-30 minutes and portfolio of drawings or designs	25 hours

Table 1 Sector Average Module Hours Allocated to Assessments

UoR Curriculum Framework Relevant Programme Principles
1) Ensure teaching, assessment and marking are proportionate and distributed effectively to support learning and wellbeing for staff and students
2) Planning for parity of student workload between modules that have the same credit weighting
3) Planning assessment across a programme to shape learning and provide regular, timely opportunities for feedback and reflection

SCAFFOLDING ASSESSMENT LITERACY

Students need time to develop their understanding of the type and variety of assessments they will encounter at Reading. They will need some scaffolded support to help them understand how to go about doing the task, to understand the assessment criteria. Front loading students' understanding of module and assessment timelines, and actively checking they understand expectations, is critical to enabling students to better manage their time and workload, in particular for students with varying needs.

As a programme team, consider when and where students have opportunities to learn more about their assessments and do some work towards them e.g. formative tasks such as reviewing exemplars, creating tasks for them to engage with marking criteria etc. This process will help you build a picture of students developing assessment literacy and identify whether more scaffolding is needed. Figure 2 illustrates how formative assessment opportunities can support learning across a programme. By mapping out when formative and summative tasks are due in, opportunities for feedback to feed forward can be established within and between modules.
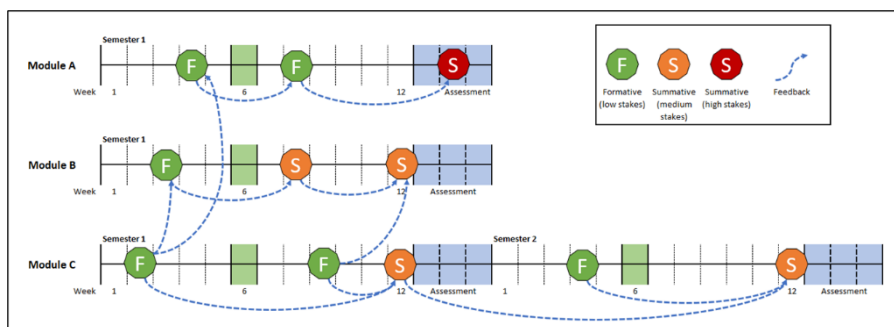

Figure 2 Example of Student Assessment Distribution (Russell and Bygate, 2010)

Setting early short formative or low stakes summative assessments that prepare students well for their summative assignment (especially in the early stages of a programme) is a powerful strategy. As a programme team you could consider the following:

- Are students asked to produce any drafts to discuss in class with peers or conduct a self-assessment on?

- Are there periods of time in the year when students are doing a lot of formative activities at once? How might this affect their workloads and wellbeing?

- It is University policy that every student receives a minimum of one piece of formative or summative feedback before the winter break Check that this will happen for level 4 and 7 students.

PROGRAMMATIC APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT DISTRIBUTION

It is recommended that programme teams work together to develop an assessment calendar to reduce bunching of assessments across programmes. This can reduce marking bunching for staff too, minimising impact on student and staff wellbeing.

As a programme team, work together to arrange assessment hand in dates which enable staff and students to manage their workloads. Consider the following:

- Can submission deadlines for end of semester assignments be spaced so that multiple assignments are not due in the same week?

- Do most modules have 2 assessments or is there a tendency for 3?

- If deadlines are clustered towards the end of term, can they be spread between the final weeks so multiple assessment submissions within 1 or 2 days be avoided?

- Can coursework be submitted prior to the 3 week assessment period so students have time to focus on exam revision?

- Where students choose between two optional modules, can deadlines be the same?

- Can markers realistically mark the work within 15 days or is their marking load bunched?

- How can students use their feedback to feed forward? E.g., are they writing reports in Semester 1 which can link to a report assessment in Semester 2?

- Is there time for students to use their feedback between summative assessments?

Checklist for Assessment Volume and Distribution

1. Do the number of assessments match the University policy?

2. Are the assessment tasks commensurate with the module's credit weighting?

3. Might the use of portfolios result in an additional workload burden for students owing to multiple sub-tasks?

4. Are the assessment deadlines distributed throughout the semester or bunched at the end?

5. Is the number of exams equally split between the two end of semester assessment periods for each programme?

6. Are there opportunities for students to use their feedback to feed forward?

7. Are there opportunities for formative feedback?

8. Is there the staff resource to manage the marking load?

9. Are any members of staff likely to experience marking bunching?

"I think that I have a manageable amount of assessments which helps me constantly learn and feel engaged with my modules. I just think they need to be more evenly distributed throughout the year as a lot of them are due on the same day in April which makes it stressful to handle so many deadlines at once". University of Reading student, 2021.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

As a programme team, ensure spend time looking at how many assessments students are doing each semester, the volume of work involved and how these are scaffolded and distributed, ensuring that the number of assessment is compliant with University policy. As a team, ensure that there is a reasonable distribution of assessment deadlines to avoid bunching of assessments for students. For help in implementing an appropriate suite of assessments for your programmes, with parity of student effort between modules, please contact the ADE (Academic Development and Enhancement) team.

To contact us and explore other guides in our Focus On: series, please visit https://www.reading.ac.uk/cqsd/teaching-resources

References and Further Reading

We have collated a selection of useful resources on designing assessment packages which effectively distribute student workload on a Talis Reading list: https://rl.talis.com/3/reading/lists/ED8C974E-C3D6-616D-19B7-E0E61216C893.html

Russell, M. and Bygate D. (2010) ESCAPE Project. https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/handle/2299/4331

- Russell, M. (2010). Assessment patterns: A review of the possible consequences. https://blogs.kcl.ac.uk/aflkings/files/2019/08/ESCAPE-AssessmentPatterns-ProgrammeView.pdf

Harland, T., McLean, A., Wass, R., Miller, E., & Nui Sim, K. (2015). An assessment arms race and its fallout: High-stakes grading and the case for slow scholarship. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *40*(4), 528-541. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2014.931927

O'Neil, G. (2019). Why don't we want to reduce assessment? *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (AISHE-J) *11*(2), 1-7. https://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/415

Tomas, C., & Jessop, T. (2019). Struggling and juggling: A comparison of student assessment loads across research and teaching-intensive universities. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *44*(1), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1463355