

Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health.

Online Blended Learning Assessment (Semester 1, 2020) - Core principles for the design of assessment tasks

Summary

Taught programmes will need to implement revised assessment processes for semester 1 (2020-21) to ensure that assessment can be carried out effectively regardless of the level of COVID19 restrictions in place. Should social distancing measures change in the months to come it is important that staff and students feel confident that planned assessments are unlikely to be subject to future change at short notice.

In June 2020, the University Senate approved that assessment tasks would be delivered online for semester 1 (2020-21) and be conducted in line with existing University assessment policies and principles.

This document summarises the core guiding principles underpinning the design of assessment tasks for semester 1 (2020-21). These are recommended to ensure that assessment tasks are valid, fair, reliable and inclusive by design and should attract minimal requests for further adjustment for reasons of disability. The core principles also support the more detailed discussion and documentation being produced by individual Faculties.

In recognising how positive and helpful the Professional Societies and Regulatory Bodies have been in working with programmes in our move towards online assessments, we will further develop this process of consultation and review of online assessment. However it is also noted that there are still cases where there is a formal requirement for campus or online invigilated/proctored assessments during the teaching and examination weeks of Semester 1 (e.g. for reasons of regulatory compliance). In these instances the core principles for design (3) should still be applied.

Longer term work on assessment design, including inclusive design, literacy, delivery and related tool kits will start in Autumn 2020 through a University level task and finish group led by Caroline Bowsher and Louise Pepper-Kernot, supported by the Institute of Teaching and Learning (6). The experiences of staff and students in the assessment periods from March 2020 onwards will feed into this group.

Programme Design and Assessment

Programmes are designed around intended learning outcomes (ILOs) which specify the knowledge and skills which students should develop during their degree. Programmes and assessments should to be structured with increasing levels of challenge and should support the development of independent critical thinking skills. Teaching and learning activities, assessments and feedback shape learning experiences and enable students to develop a wide range of transferable skills and employability attributes. Learning and assessment activities should be inclusive and appropriate for a diverse audience.

The Purpose of Assessment

Assessment should be valid, reliable, fair, accessible and inclusive (appendix 1). Traditional assessments, for example essays, portfolios, timed exams have an important role, but alternative approaches to assessment may be more appropriate to test whether students are achieving certain ILOs and help them to become more effective learners.

Outputs from assessments also have an important purpose in helping to show educators whether their teaching is effective and whether students are engaged and understand what is being taught.

Designing assessments which are scalable to meet different student numbers and demonstrate consistency and ensure confidence in reproducibility are key. They should meet any professional and/or regulatory body requirements, where appropriate, to ensure they can demonstrate professional competence.

Core Principles for the design of assessment tasks (2020/21)

These principles are initially intended for semester 1 of the academic year 2020/21, however they should also inform the design of assessment for semester 2 until further clarity is available on the format of teaching and assessment delivery from the University.

These principles encompass a University-wide focus on assessment for, and not just of, learning, with emphasis on increased flexibility in assessments.

1. Core Principles

Assessments will:

- provide a valid and reliable approach to fairly evaluate students' ability to meet unit/module and programme learning outcomes
- be designed in a way that reduces the need for disability-related adjustments
- be accessible for all students and inclusive by design
- provide every student with an equal opportunity to demonstrate their achievement
- be authentic and offer students contextualised, meaningful tasks that replicate real-world challenges
- comply with regulators where applicable
- be communicated clearly to students at the start of the semester in terms of timing, marking arrangements and clear assessment briefs and criteria.

Assessment design should also contribute to:

- address any awarding gaps that may exist in current assessment approaches
- support student engagement, learning, progression, retention and address the needs of our diverse student population
- removing excessive summative assessment whilst supporting student learning through formative assessment.

2. Practical Considerations

For effective assessment design programme teams should take into consideration the following guidance:

- Where possible, avoid the use of traditional, closed book exams. These have the added challenge of finding ways to replicate exam room conditions.
- Make greater use of asynchronous or synchronous assessments throughout the academic year, as these reduce the emphasis on single high-stakes assessments in an examination period and can be less prone to issues that could affect completion.
- When designing assessments, consider the adaptability of the assessment task to different scenarios, e.g. on campus or online, in the event of a change in circumstances.
- To ensure confidence in assessment, the degree to which we can trust that work being assessed is the student's own, they should be designed to be authentic and assess higher levels of critical thinking and/or incorporate fixed time, limited availability tests.
- Build inclusivity into the assessment, which will benefit many of our students and will also minimise the need for bespoke adaptation for disabled students.
- Refer to the intended learning outcomes of the course unit, and those of the programme, to ensure the assessment only assess what needs to be assessed. Assessment guidance should identify which ILOs are being assessed. This will reduce overassessment and encourage more focussed assessment.

- Make use of assessment activities that, where appropriate, promote reflection and use of information in specific contexts which require explanation, reasoning and application, rather than just memory recall.
- Provide students with opportunities for rehearsal and formative feedback with peers/tutors prior to the assessment task.
- Provide clear guidance in advance about timing of assessments, including when they must be completed, how long they will take, how much time should be spent on each question, and expected word counts for answers.
- Ensure that any deadlines across a Programme are staggered.
- Review moderation approaches to ensure they are appropriate for a changed assessment profile.
- Identify the need to explore appropriate software tools to support on-line assessment.

Policy, Practical Support and Next Steps

- An online assessment matrix has been developed will contain a summary of approved, inclusive online assessment types, durations, considerations and recommendations for their use, alignment to software solutions, examples of use and links to further support.
- Programme teams need to engage with individual professional/regulatory bodies regarding proposed assessment approaches as a matter of urgency.
- Programme teams with a justified case for 'invigilation' and 'on-campus' assessment types or those not listed in the online assessment matrix as an option will be required to seek approval from their Faculty Vice Dean Teaching, Learning and Students or their nominee providing the following information:
 - Rationale for alternative approach
 - Proposed alternative
 - Confirmation from DASS of any adjustments that may be required
- DASS will have a dedicated contact point over the summer period for assessment planning queries (dass@manchester.ac.uk).
- TLSD will have a dedicated contact point over the summer period for assessment policy queries (m.graham@manchester.ac.uk).
- Identification of solution for invigilation and proctoring for semester 1 assessments (September 2020). NB: current resource spent on campus invigilation costs is approx. £650k.
- Delivery of assessment in terms of IT tools (September 2020).
- An online and blended assessment toolkit to support staff with planning for semester 1 based on the Assessment Matrix (1) will be built by the ITL team and made available via the Institute of Teaching and Learning website (August/September).
- A student facing online and blended assessment toolkit based on the Assessment Matrix (1) will be built by the ITL team and made available via the Institute of Teaching and Learning website (October 2020).
- An [Effective Practice Hub](#) with assessment and feedback case studies building on the Assessment Matrix (1) will be integrated into and made available via [the Institute of Teaching and Learning website](#)
- Peer support for online assessment will be available via the University's Teaching and Learning Online Network ([TALON](#)) on Yammer.
- Student Partner Interns supporting individual Faculties will be available provide feedback on assessment design.
- Review of mitigating circumstances policy/procedures for 2020/21 eg whether medical evidence will still be required or if issues/computer failure will be accepted as grounds for mitigation.

Appendix 1: The Rationale for Inclusive Assessment Design

As Higher Education (HE) has expanded, greater student diversity has followed. An inclusive approach aims to make HE accessible for all, rather than focussing on specific targeted groups of those with protected characteristics such as disabled students. The QAA's Quality Code for HE Advice and Guidance on Assessment document states:

“Inclusive design implies a more strategic approach, which reduces the likelihood of making one-off, reactive modifications. Individual modifications are made where necessary and appropriate, but reliance on reactive modifications can place both students and staff under additional pressure and increases the risk of inequities.”

Specifically related to disability, the University's Equality Act (2010) obligations are anticipatory in nature. They require consideration of, and action in relation to, barriers that impede all disabled people prior to an individual disabled student seeking to access education. Of over 7000 students (around 18%) who have disclosed a disability to the University, 3110 have either (or a combinations of) extra time, rest breaks or toilet breaks. As the 7 calendar day assessments in semester 2 (2019/20) were inclusive by design, the need for these contingent adjustments was removed.