

## Guidance on Time on Task for assessments

### Purpose of this document

This document aims to provide an easy-to-use tool when designing assessment tasks that will take into account not only the output as words or minutes, but the effort and time required for the students to engage with the assessment task.

It can be used within module teams during the planning stage, but also in the classroom with the students when introducing the assessment task.

Taking into account common first year delivery, discussion on “Time-on-Task” for assessments could be a valuable addition to explore cross-disciplinary expectations from students.

Finally, it is a useful tool for holistically considering the assessment load of students throughout each semester at course level. Using this tool at course level it can also facilitate discussions of how assessment tasks are integrated to support students’ knowledge acquisition, and skills development.

In more detail, this tool can be used:

- when designing new assessment tasks
  - by facilitating module / course team discussions when considering the demands of the assessment tasks (whether core or applied core).
  - by supporting the course/module team with estimating the appropriate number of credits and notional hours required for the completion of the assessment task for students.
- when evaluating effectiveness of existing assessment tasks.
- when introducing assessment tasks to students.
  - a. by supporting delivery teams with creating relevant resources, guidance, and activities to facilitate the development of students’ assessment literacy.

It is not expected that this tool will be applicable to all types of assessments at all levels.

### Assessment Tariffs, Policies and Guidelines

Assessment guidelines and policies may exist at a local level within each faculty, that are informed by University Policy.

This guidance does not intend to replace any of the Faculty or University Policies but is intended to be used as a supportive tool for designing assessment and preparing students for assessment.

### Designing assessment through a “Time-on-Task” lens

Assessment output tends to be defined by word-counts in a written submission, or minutes in a presentation. However, fewer words can, in fact, make an assessment more challenging, and often the time and effort requirements are overlooked and underestimated. By designing assessment through a “Time-on-Task” lens, we could provide the necessary guidance and support to students that are completing the assessment task.

When considering ‘Time-on-Task’, a starting point would be to consider the assessment credits assigned for the task. Note that although 20 module credits are equated to 200 notional hours of learning, 20 assessment credits do not equate to 200 hours on assessment tasks.

With the assessment credits as a starting point, the following three questions (Fig 1) could be used to support the assessment design process through a “Time on Task” lens in order to help students to develop their assessment literacy and to ‘[Pass first time, on time](#)’. The questions are interlinked and the order that are presented, does not necessarily indicate the order that they should be addressed during the assessment design process.

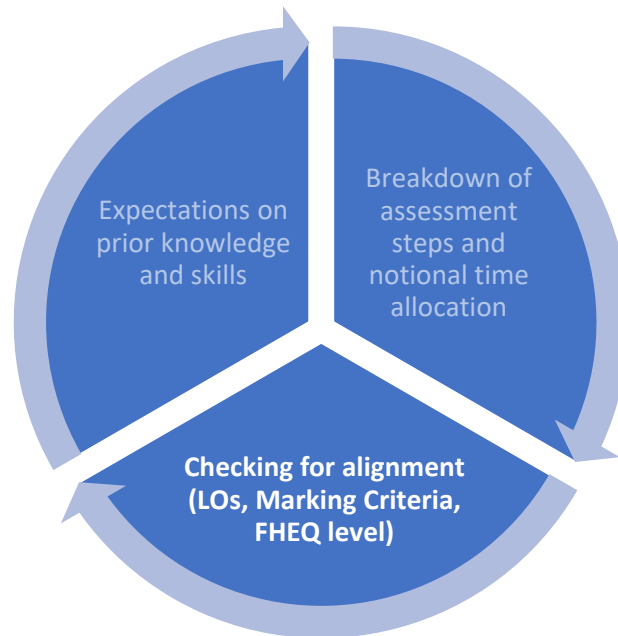


Figure 1: Key considerations when designing assessment through a Time-on-Task lens

Question 1: What are we expecting the students to know and/or be able to do, that is required for the assessment, but they are not learning as part of this module?

Frequently, we rely on students’ prior knowledge and skills to allow them to complete an assessment task. We expect students to have gained this knowledge and developed those skills outside of the module that is being assessed. For instance, asking students to prepare a presentation, assumes that the students are familiar with public speaking and possibly with the use of presentation software such as PowerPoint.

Similarly, we expect students to have some prior knowledge and experience with specific assessment types e.g. writing a report. It is important to remember that our students come from different entry points. Therefore, the expectations on prior knowledge and skills need to be clearly communicated to students.

At Level 5 and 6, we expect students to have developed their assessment literacy through assessment tasks that have been completed at previous modules. This could be clearly communicated to both staff and students by establishing a transparent assessment strategy at course level that shows how different assessment tasks are interlinked, with a focus on both the knowledge acquired, and the skills developed.

With a transparent assessment strategy that shows how assessment tasks are connected throughout the course, the students could have the option to refer to prior assessment tasks and engage with the feedback received.

By identifying the expectations on prior knowledge and skills, the module/team can further signpost students to resources to help them refresh their knowledge. **Appendix 1 – Part 1** provides a template for collecting such information.

In theory, as this is considered pre-existing knowledge, limited additional time should be taken into account for those elements when estimating the notional time-on-task for assessment (see Question 2).

Question 2: Time-on-Task estimation: What are the steps that the students need to take to successfully complete the assessment task and how long would each of them take?

Breaking down assessment tasks to indicative steps that the students need to take in order to complete the assignment can be helpful for both staff and students.

This activity could also be performed together with the students during a session when assessment requirements are discussed. The outcome of this activity can be used to design a model for students when undertaking the assessment task.

Students at different levels will require different amount of time to complete similar tasks. It is important for the course team to be able to estimate the time that a 'novice' would require to complete the task and not to base their estimations to their own 'expert' capabilities. As students progress through their course, they would have gained experience with performing similar tasks and they would have developed further the relevant skills. It is therefore possible, that the same type of task could take less for students at higher levels (e.g., compiling a bibliography, using excel etc). Here it is also important to consider once again the course assessment strategy and how certain assessment tasks may be interlinked and provide a developmental path for students both in terms of knowledge acquisition and of mastery of skills.

An example of the breakdown of an assessment task and indicative time on task is illustrated in Table 1.

Certain steps could be included in most assessment tasks and help improve students' feedback and assessment literacy, independently of the type of assessment at hand. Type of such steps include:

- [Reflection on past feedback](#)
- Self-evaluation using marking criteria and rubrics
- Peer discussions
- Analysis of past exemplars

*Table 1: Illustrative example of potential steps and recommended time on task for an undergraduate student to write a review of a scientific paper of 1000 words (5 assessment credits).*

<b>Steps (not in order of completion, as this will depend on individual students)</b>	<b>Notional Time on Task</b>
Reflect on feedback from formative assessment / prior modules	0.5 hours
Reading the paper	2 hour
Identifying unknown terms	0.5 hours
Research for unknown terms	Up to 2 hours
Literature research to support/reject the argument of the paper	Up to 10 hours
Discuss with peers	1 hour
Draft the review	3 hours
Self-assess by comparing with the marking rubric	1 hour
Compare with past exemplars	1 hour
Finalise the review	2 hours
Edit and proof-read the review	1 hour
<b>Total</b>	<b>24 hours</b>

Question 3: Are the steps identified aligned with other key factors?

With the breakdown of the assessment task, it is important to reflect and consider if the recommended steps are aligned with other key factors such as the marking criteria, the module and course learning outcomes and the FHEQ (Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications) level.

The following checklist (also available within Appendix 1) can be used to confirm the suitability of the steps identified for the assessment task:

- Are the steps selected relevant to the marking criteria? Are there any steps that need to be added, altered or removed?
  - Example 1: Let's assume that an assessment task requires students to develop a website. A step could be added in the breakdown of the assessment task to work on the appearance and graphics of the website, and for this step 1 hour has been allocated. When comparing the steps with the marking criteria, it becomes evident that the marking criteria do not refer to the appearance/graphics of the website but only the content and the sources used. This observation, will lead us to reconsider and reduce the notional time allocated on the appearance of the website.
  - Example 2: Let's assume that an assessment task requires students to write a report supported by the literature. The break-down of the assessment tasks includes several steps such as literature search, writing the report, and proof-reading. When comparing the steps with the marking criteria, we could see that 10% is given for an accurate reference list. By doing this comparison, we can see that an additional step needs to be added [producing and checking the reference list] to reflect the marking criteria.

- ☑ Are the students equipped to complete those steps? If not, are there sufficient support mechanisms in place if students need help with any of the steps?
  - This can go beyond the assumed pre-existing knowledge and skills, as new skills could be introduced as well. Therefore, further consideration needs to be given as to how the students are being supported throughout the preparation for the assessment task.
- ☑ Is this assessment task clearly aligned in terms of skills and knowledge development with prior or future assessment tasks?
- ☑ Does the allocated amount of time align with the expected assessment credits? If not, can we make the appropriate changes?
- ☑ Are the identified sub-steps relevant to the module and course learning outcomes?
- ☑ Are the assessment demands and sub-steps aligned with the level that the students are at during their course (Appendix 2)?
  - Example: an essay as an assessment task at Level 4 and at Level 7 would have completely different expectations on both the breadth and depth of coverage. However, if the same assessment credits have been allocated to both tasks, a similar notional time on task is expected. The demands of the assessment for a Level 7 student would be higher and aligned with the relevant FHEQ level descriptors which include “a systematic understanding of knowledge”, as opposed to “Knowledge of the underlying concepts and principles” for Level 4. Establishing the expectations on the level and requirements for the assessment task could be introduced within relevant assessment rubrics which can be used both by staff and students to facilitate a dialogue on expectations both on output and time for engagement with the task. Once again, the importance of a transparent assessment strategy that interlinks different assessment tasks and support the development of both the knowledge and the skills of students is evident.

Appendix 1

Template for Time-on-Task module/course team discussions. <i>Feel free to modify for your own needs</i>			
<b>Assessment title:</b>			
<b>Module:</b>			
<b>Course:</b>			
Part 1: Establishing required prior knowledge and skills			
Category of Prior knowledge and skills	List all relevant items	List available resources to support students – consider options from previous modules, or university-wide initiatives.	
Employability skills			
Discipline specific skills			
General knowledge			
Disciplinary knowledge acquired in prior modules			
Knowledge of specific tools, equipment, software required			
Part 2: Breakdown of assessment tasks in sub steps <i>(Feel free to add or remove as many steps as necessary)</i>			
Step	Description	Notional Time-on-Task	Relevant resources to support students
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
Total			
Part 3: Checklist for compliance/alignment			
Item	Yes/No	Further comments	
Are the steps selected relevant to the marking criteria?			
Are the students equipped to complete those steps? If not, are there sufficient support mechanisms in place if students need help with any of the steps?			
Does the allocated amount of time align with the expected assessment credits? If not, can we make the appropriate changes?			
Is this assessment task clearly aligned in terms of skills and knowledge development with prior or future assessment tasks?			
Are the identified sub-steps relevant to the module and course learning outcomes?			
Are the assessment demands and sub-steps aligned with the level that the students are at during their course (Appendix 2)?			

[Appendix 2 – QAA FHEQ Level Descriptors \(2014\)](#)

The below text has been copied from the QAA “[The frameworks for HE qualifications of UK Degree-awarding bodies](#)” document (2014)

**Level 4**

Students successfully completing programme requirements at level 4 will have demonstrated:

- Knowledge of the underlying concepts and principles associated with their areas of study, and an ability to evaluate and interpret these within the context of that area of study.
- An ability to present, evaluate, and interpret qualitative and quantitative data, to develop lines of argument and make sound judgements in accordance with basic theories and concepts of their subject(s) of study.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems related to their area(s) of study and/or work
- communicate the results of their study/work accurately and reliably, and with structured and coherent arguments
- undertake further training and develop new skills within a structured and managed environment.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility

**Level 5**

Students successfully completing programme requirements at level 5 will have demonstrated:

- Knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles of their area(s) of study, and of the way in which those principles have developed.
- An ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, including, where appropriate, the application of those principles in an employment context.
- Knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in their subject(s), and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study.
- An understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis
- effectively communicate information, arguments and analysis in a variety of forms to specialist and non-specialist audiences and deploy key techniques of the discipline effectively
- undertake further training, develop existing skills and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making

### Level 6

Students successfully completing programme requirements at level 6 will have demonstrated:

- A systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline.
- An ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline.
- Conceptual understanding that enables the student:
  - to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline; and
  - to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline.
- An appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge.
- The ability to manage their own learning and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary resources (e.g. refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects
- critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem
- communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
  - the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
  - decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts
  - the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.

### Level 7

Students successfully completing programme requirements at level 7 will have demonstrated:

- A systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study, or area of professional practice.
- A comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship.



- originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline
- conceptual understanding that enables the student:
  - to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline
  - to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level
- continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
  - the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
  - decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations
  - the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development