QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

FACT SHEET 4: ASSESSMENT AND QUALIFICATIONS

Assessment and Qualifications

1 Senate guidelines constitute a framework of policy designed to ensure all modules, within a given qualification, adopt standards of performance which are broadly similar, and that students can have reasoned expectations about what they need to achieve in order to attain a given outcome. The Qualifications and Assessment Committee is responsible to the Education Committee for policy and regulations relating to modules, qualifications, assessment and the classification of qualifications (excluding research degrees and higher doctorates) within the University. The Education Committee is responsible to the Senate for strategy and policy relating to curriculum, assessment and qualifications (including collaborative provision), learning and teaching and the student experience in the University in accordance with the University's strategic objectives.

2 The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching Innovation) has a responsibility for ensuring that there are appropriate frameworks for the assessment of students. The Qualifications and Assessment Committee is chaired by an Executive Dean and the Education Committee is chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching Innovation).

3 The Director of Assessment, Credit and Qualifications is responsible to the Director, Academic Services, for the development, integration and implementation of the University’s policies in relation to assessment, credits and qualifications.

4 The University’s internal Curriculum Management Guide provides information on most areas covered by this fact sheet for staff.

5 Assessment policy states that each 30-60 credit module must normally contain at least two independent assessment components: a controlled (examinable) component and a continuous assessment component.

Awarding Authority

6 There are well established arrangements for the awarding of module credit and qualifications in the University.

7 Examination and Assessment Board: Every taught module has an Examination and Assessment Board (EAB), responsible for the production of the examination paper, marking scheme, and all matters relating to the recommendation of module results. The EAB:

- organises and supervises marking and the standardisation of marks;
- reviews the performance of students;
- addresses issues raised by exceptional circumstances;
- meets after each module presentation to establish the result boundaries for that cohort and to recommend individual result grades for all students on the module.

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1 Links to external and internal websites were checked in September 2016. Some web links referred to in this document may be intranet based and so restricted to Open University staff.
The award of module results is based on performance in both continuous assessment and examinable component. The EAB has available to it:

- the ‘examined’ work of each student;
- listings of each student’s complete continuous assessment and examinable component record;
- special circumstances information about individuals, or about a group of individuals (for instance where adverse conditions have affected an examination centre);
- information about the script markers, supporting statistical information on the distribution of the continuous assessment and examinable component scores;
- statistical information relating to previous cohorts on the same module.

The EAB works within the framework of the University’s Senate Guidelines for the Award of Results. Using the statistical analyses, together with qualitative reports, to consider the performance of individual markers, EABs have the facility to adjust examinable component scores at individual script marker level; question level and overall examination score level (see section 4.6.).

The Module Results Approval and Qualifications Classification Panel: The Examination and Assessment Board recommendations are subject to ratification by the Module Results Approval and Qualifications Classification Panel, which is responsible, on behalf of Senate, for the classification of degrees and professional diplomas, monitoring the maintenance of standards of approved qualifications and the ratification of all module results, with the exception of higher degrees by research, in which case the Research Degrees Committee is responsible, on behalf of Senate, for the award of degrees.

Validated qualifications: Each qualification validated by the Open University and designed and delivered by an approved institution must be recommended by a Board of Examiners convened, constituted and acting under regulations approved by the University and including all members approved by the University as external examiners for the programme, with signed confirmation from the institution that assessments have been carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University.

Assessment Strategy

The general arrangements for module assessment, and the minimum requirements for a degree, are described in Essential documents on Study at the OU website. The University’s arrangements for the assessment of students comply with the Quality Assurance Agency’s Quality Code Chapter B6, Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning.

Taught modules: Module-specific information on assessment is sent to students at the start of the module. Each module must normally contain at least two independent assessment components, one of which must be completed under controlled conditions with an identity verification check (carried out at the examination where there is one) and one of which allows students to submit assignments to a pre-set deadline with unlimited access to source materials, module units, etc. (continuous assessment).

Students are advised in module materials about the assessment dates for their module; formative and summative assignments are identified, and the requirements for passing the module explained.

The assessment strategy for a new module is submitted for approval on behalf of or by the Qualifications and Assessment Committee, at least 2 years prior to the first presentation. The approval process requires the module team to specify:
• the number and relative weighting of Tutor-Marked Assignments (continuously assessed student work which is marked, graded and commented on by tutors) and computer marked assignments (CMAs);
• student feedback levels on CMAs;
• arrangements for any substitution of assignments;
• examination type (script/computer marked, oral) or the nature of the end of module assessment, its length, cut-off date, weighting and marking;
• threshold scores on any element of assessment;
• result statuses (e.g. merit, distinction);
• special arrangements for students with disabilities, including provision for alternative arrangements.

The requirements for each grade of pass are specified for modules with two components of assessment as three threshold scores, i.e. the overall examination score (OES), the overall continues assessment score (OCAS) and the weighted average of OES and OCAS. These requirements are set for each module by the Examination and Assessment Board within the framework of Senate Guidelines. The normal minimum level of provision of summative assignments for a number of years has been 3 summative Tutor-Marked Assignments workload equivalent for a 30 credit module and 6 Tutor-Marked Assignment workload equivalents for a 60 credit module.

Qualifications: Senate principles for undergraduate qualifications state that undergraduate degrees should be designed with pathways that comprise mandatory study of 120 credits at each of Level 1, 2 and 3. Taught Masters Degrees comprise 180 credits of study at master’s level.

Research degrees: The arrangements for submission of a thesis and examination for the award of a research degree are described in the Research Degrees Handbook. The examination panel consists of an examination panel chair and at least two examiners, at least one of whom is external. Guidelines for Heads of Discipline, Supervisors and Examination Panels and for students specify the whole process from submission of a thesis through to award. The awarding authority for research degrees, including those in sponsoring establishments, is the Research Degrees Committee, on behalf of the Senate.

Classification of Results

Classification of a qualification is a computer-based process, which draws on the result of modules which may be counted towards the qualification, and which the student has opted to count towards it.

Classification of qualification result: Undergraduate degree qualifications are classified as first, upper second, lower second or third class. Of our other qualifications, some are awarded without classification, whilst others are awarded with merit, or with distinction. Undergraduate qualifications are classified using result grades from OU (or collaborative scheme) modules above level 1 that have been approved for the particular qualification. A maximum of 240 credits, and a minimum of 120 credits at level 3, are used for determining the classification. The best 120 credits from level 3 modules are given twice the weight of the other credits used, and according to the number of credits achieved, the student is awarded the appropriate class of degree, provided the average of the best 60 credits from level 3 modules is as good or better than the class of honours indicated by the number previously calculated, in both cases using an approved and fixed scale. Similar rules are used to calculate the classification for our other classified qualifications.
**Module results grades:** At level 1, the majority of undergraduate module results passes are graded as either pass, or pass with distinction. Above level 1, pass grades 1, 2, 3 or 4 are awarded (where 1=distinction). Modules results relating to other qualifications can be graded in other ways. Where there is both a continuous and an examinable component of assessment, students must attain a certain threshold in each component to be awarded the particular grade of pass. Students are informed of the module results available to them, and the method of determination in the Assessment Handbook applicable to their module.

**External Examining**

External examiners act as independent and impartial advisers providing institutions with informed comment on the standards set and student achievement in relation to those standards. External examining is therefore an integral and important part of institutional quality assurance. The University’s external examining system complies with the Quality Assurance Agency’s UK Quality Code for Higher Education, in particular, Chapter B7 on external examining.

**Role of External Examiners:** An external examiner is usually a senior member of another University who meets criteria as outlined in the ‘Quality Code’. The external examiner’s two principle functions are to enable the University to:

- subject its examining methods and processes to external assessment;
- avail itself of direct experience of relevant standards in other universities.

**External Examiner Duties** can be summarised as, for each module:

- to attend meetings of the Examination and Assessment Board as required;
- jointly, with the Board, to moderate and approve the final draft of each examination question paper or questions(s) for end-of-module assessment (EMA) in other formats, together with the related marking scheme or notes of the guidance of markers;
- to consider (i) the validity of the module assessments, Any Residential School assessments, and the final examinations or EMA, and (ii) the reliability of the mode of monitoring and moderating the marks of assessments, Residential School assessments and the final examinations or EMA, and to report to the Board on such revision as you may consider necessary;
- to scrutinise a sample of the examination scripts or EMA and to give advice as necessary to the Internal Examiners;
- jointly, with the Board, to approve the Final Results List of candidates by endorsing the criteria for the different grades of result;
- following each Award Meeting, to submit a report to the Vice-Chancellor on the Final Results List and on any other matter which is felt to be appropriate, including the continued appropriateness of the module material or any part of it (recognising the time scales of processes for withdrawing or modifying modules).

**Appointment of External Examiners** is approved at Module Team, Faculty and University level. The latter approval is granted by the Director of Assessment, Credit and Qualifications or the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching Innovation). The criteria for nomination and appointment are monitored by the Examination and Assessment Section, specifically the Assessment Policy Office, which also maintains a register of appointments and periods of tenure. Length of appointment varies, but the University adheres to the Quality Assurance Agency’s guidance regarding a four-year maximum, normally.

**Report:** At the end of each awarding period external examiners submit a report addressed to the Vice-Chancellor with comments on areas including:
• the appropriateness and currency of the module materials and assessment tasks, including end of module tasks, the module structure and content, the quality, methods of tutoring in relation to the most recent module presentation and Learning Outcomes;
• standards of student performance comparable with similar provision in other UK institutions;
• the assessment strategy for the module;
• aspects about functioning of collaborative provision, if appropriate;
• the administration of the examinations/examinable component, the production of any examination question paper or EMA, and the procedures adopted at the co-ordination, standardisation and qualification meetings, including consideration of special circumstances information for individual students and borderline candidates and adherence to University policy;
• good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment including suggestions for further opportunities for the enhancement of the learning opportunities offered to students;
• feedback on whether issues previously raised have been addressed by the University.

The document The Role of External Examiners at the Open University, contains more information on external examining.

The Examinable Component
The examinable component of a module may be an examination or a piece of work such as a dissertation or project or it may include both an examination and other work.

28 Examinations: A copy of each draft question paper and marking scheme is referred by the Examination and Assessment Board to the external examiner for approval. Guidelines on this are in the document Notes on Examination Papers and Marking Schemes available from one of the Examination Officers in the Examination and Assessment Section.

29 Marking: It is University policy that marking schemes must be produced for all examination papers, and moderated by the external examiner. It is the responsibility of the Examination and Assessment Board to decide on the appropriate method of marking.

All markers are nominated by the Examination and Assessment Board for appointment by the University. The marking is either done by external markers, who are usually members of the Associate Lecturing staff that tutor on the module, or centrally (i.e. by members of the central and regional / national academic staff) under the direction of a marking co-ordinator. Before marking begins all markers participate in a co-ordination exercise where a representative sample of scripts is considered and the marking standards are set. A minimum of 15% or 15 pieces of work from each member are monitored, that is second marked by members of the Board or by experienced Associate Lecturers acting on behalf of the Board. The scores given by markers who are found to be lenient or severe can be adjusted at the Standardisation meeting. Where markers are found to be inconsistent, remarking of all scripts from that marker will take place.

31 The Standardisation meeting is held by the Examination and Assessment Board for each module to report on the monitoring of the sample scripts from each member of the marking teams. The Board consider how the examination paper has been answered by the cohort as a whole, and whether the marking has been completed to the standards expected. Where this is not the case, procedures exist for corrective action e.g. the adjustment of examination scores at marker level, question level or overall examination level, or remarking of scripts. To aid this process the Board is given statistical analyses relating to both the current presentation and previous presentations.
Feedback to students: Most modules now provide feedback to students on their examination or end of module assessment in the form of a performance profile.

A Report on Examinations and Assessment is produced each year by the Head of Examinations and Assessment. It is submitted to the Assessment Operations Group, with a summary of main issues being submitted to the Qualifications and Assessment Committee. The report describes the examinations and assessment process for the year, identifying any issues for attention.

The Results of Research Degrees are reported to the Research Degrees Committee.

Continuous Assessment

Continuous assessment on Open University modules consists primarily of tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) and, on some modules, computer-marked assignments (CMAs) and interactive computer marked assignments (iCMAs). TMAs are mainly essay or short-answer questions, although some modules may also require extended essays, dissertations or projects. CMAs comprise a series of questions for which students choose the answers from a given selection. A minority of modules have CMAs. iCMAs require students to answer a series of questions online that can vary in nature (e.g. multiple choice, drag and drop, free text.)

Detailed feedback on TMAs provided by Associate Lecturers is the main form of individualised tuition received by students. This correspondence tuition is designed to improve students’ learning and is an important source of advice for maintaining or improving students’ progress on a module. Associate Lecturers are required to send the marked script with comments to the Examination and Assessment Section for recording of scores and transmission to the student within 14 days of the deadline for receipt of the TMA.

Associate Lecturers are provided with help and advice on how to support students in the learning process through briefing meetings with the Module Team and Staff Tutors and through written materials as described in Fact Sheet 7.

Monitoring of Assignment Marking for Maintenance of Standards

The monitoring of assignment marking is central to the University’s quality assurance processes. It is the function through which the University ensures that every student receives quality tuition of the highest standard. Monitoring has four primary objectives:

- to ensure grades given by different tutors are consistent with each other and with the intentions of the Examinations and Assessment Board;
- to ensure that each tutor’s correspondence teaching is appropriate in both quality and quantity and shows an understanding of the module aims and content and of students’ needs;
- to provide staff development for tutorial staff and to share good practice in correspondence tuition;
- to enable the Examinations and Assessment Board, including the External Examiner, to see the way in which the module and its assessment has been received by students and tutors.

The Framework for Monitoring describes the processes and procedures for monitoring. The Examination and Assessment Section undertakes the selection of scripts to be monitored and maintains records on the process.

The Monitor, who is usually a member of academic and regional /national staff or an experienced Associate Lecturer, is recruited by academic units. The Monitor is responsible
for commenting on the tutor’s performance and identifying strengths and weaknesses. Feedback from the monitor is provided to the tutor via the Staff Tutor.

The Levels of Monitoring applied depend on the stage in a module’s life and the experience and performance of the individual Associate Lecturer. Monitoring levels can be changed for an individual Associate Lecturer during a module presentation.

Statistical Information: The monitoring process is supported by statistical data. This includes the TTGAR (Tutor Grade Analysis Report) report which provides a breakdown of scores awarded by the tutor within bands. There is also an analysis of the tutor’s scores in comparison with other tutors within the same region and nationally. This may indicate whether the tutor has marked more leniently or more severely than other tutors. The POTT (Profile of TMA Turnaround) report provides a profile of the tutor’s return of marked TMAs and highlights where tutors have not submitted any marked TMAs 21 days after the assignment cut-off date.