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. The examinable component of a module may be an examination or a piece of work such as a dissertation or project (generically known as an end of module assessment or EMA), or it may include both an examination and other work. 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. 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 continuous assessment score (OCAS) and the weighted average of OES and OCAS.

Awarding Authority

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

7 For each of the University’s modules there is a formally constituted Module Results Panel (MRP) with membership drawn from the internal academic staff of the University. MRPs are responsible for the setting and marking of all controlled assessments for each presentation.

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1 Links to external and internal websites were checked in January 2018. Some web links referred to in this document may be intranet based and so restricted to Open University staff.
of a specific module; and for proposing a result for each student on a module presentation to the Cluster Examination and Assessment Board.

The MRP:
- prescribes suitable forms of controlled assessment and oversees preparation of materials associated with assessment for each module presentation;
- supervises marking and the standardisation of marks;
- reviews the performance of students;
- addresses issues raised by exceptional circumstances;
- proposes a result for each student in the module presentation and highlights any issues that the External Examiner for the module or Chief External Examiner should be aware of;
- makes recommendations on the conduct of controlled and continuous assessments in future presentations.

The award of module results is based on performance in both continuous assessment and examinable component. The MRP 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 information on the distribution of the continuous assessment and examinable component scores;
- statistical information relating to previous cohorts on the same module.

Once all MRPs have convened for a given conflation period, all results data are run and prepared to be considered by a Cluster Examination and Assessment Board (CEAB). The modules of the University’s curriculum are ‘clustered’ in cognate groups, typically with 15-20 modules in a cluster. For each cluster there is a formally constituted CEAB with membership drawn from academic staff of the relevant subject areas and at least one External Examiner. CEABs are responsible for reviewing and confirming the standards of the module result process, and recommending to the Module Results Approval and Qualification Panel (MRAQCP) a result for each student in a cognate group of modules.

The CEAB:
- reviews proposed outcomes of each MRP and compares with profiles of previous module presentations, identifying unusual profiles and any necessary actions, and recommending a result to MRAQCP;
- confirms that due process has been followed and that academic standards of assessment are comparable to other UK HEIs;
- comments on the External Examiners’ reports for the previous presentation of each module;
- makes recommendations for the conduct of controlled and continuous assessment in future presentations;
- agrees the mode of operation and representation required at meetings dealing with recommendations for resit or resubmission results only.

The MRP and CEAB work 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, MRPs and CEABs have the facility to adjust
examinable component scores at individual script marker level; question level and overall examination score level.

11 The **Module Results Approval and Qualifications Classification Panel** is responsible, on behalf of Senate, for receiving recommendations from CEABs and ratifying and approving the aware of module credit, student progression through qualifications and qualification classifications.

The MRAQCP is responsible, on behalf of Senate, for:

- the approval of awards, the classification of degrees and diplomas, and approval of recommendations for all credit-bearing module results including validated awards and aegrotat credit, but 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;
- monitoring the maintenance of standards in approved qualifications in consultation with Qualifications and Assessment Committee and to consider reports on the conduct of policy and procedure;
- to rescind qualifications for individual students in line with policy, where there is good reason.

12 **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**

13 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 [UK Quality Code Chapter B6](#), Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning.

14 **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).

15 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.

16 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.

17 **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.

18 **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 School, 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 Affiliated Research Centres, is the Research Degrees Committee, on behalf of the Senate.

**Classification of Results**

19 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.

20 **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 OU 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.

21 **Module results grades:** Different taught modules award different grades of pass e.g. pass grade only; distinction and pass; distinction, merit and pass; or graded credit of pass grades 1, 2, 3 and 4. 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**

22 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 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 appointed to a Cluster Examination and Assessment Board. The external examiner’s two principle functions are to enable the University to:

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

External Examiner Duties can be summarised as follows:

- jointly with the internal members of the Module Results Panels (MRP) to moderate and approve the final draft of each examination paper and End of Module Assessment (EMA) question(s) together with the related marking schemes or notes for the guidance for markers for modules within the cluster;
- to review examples of students’ continuous assessment and their marking on each presentation for modules with their module-group;
- to scrutinise a sample of examination scripts and EMAs for modules within their module-group and to give advice as necessary to the internal examiner members of the cluster examination and assessment board (CEAB);
- to attend main meetings of the CEAB as required;
- to receive a report from the Chair of each MRP on the outcomes for the module presentation and to scrutinise a data report summarising the proposed results for students;
- to receive a data report summarising the proposed module presentation results for students on each module within the External Examiner Module Group including the distribution of marks and the threshold requirements for each outcome; and comparative historical data;
- to review, with members of the CEAB, the result profiles for all modules within the cluster and raise any specific concerns with the proposed results for the modules with their module group;
- as a member of the CEAB to recommend the module result for each student and to express confidence that the standards and result recommendations are soundly based;
- to submit an External Examiner report for their module group, within 4 weeks of the CEAB main meeting, to the Vice-Chancellor commenting on the determination of the results for each module within their module group in relation to: the University’s procedures and processes for module result determination; the performance of students on the module presentations in relation to sector standards; any other matter which is felt to be appropriate.

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

Chief External Examiner is a member of a CEAB and whose purpose is to provide external assurance of the academic standards of the University’s stage progression and qualification completion processes for those qualifications within a nomination qualification group and to comment on their alignment with standards and student performance within the higher education sector.

Appointment of External Examiners is approved at Module Group, 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.

**Monitoring of Assignment Marking for Maintenance of Standards**

27 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 module team;
- 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 Module Results Panel to see the way in which the module and its assessment has been received by students and tutors.

28 The *Framework for Monitoring* describes the processes and procedures for monitoring.

29 **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.

30 **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.

31 **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.