QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

The content and links in this fact sheet are correct as of the date of last update shown. A full review of the factsheet series is planned in 2021.

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. The Qualifications and Assessment Committee is chaired by an Executive Dean and the Education Committee is chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

2 The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students) has responsibility for the Assessment Programme, which brings together developmental thinking around assessment policy, design and delivery, aligned with the Open University’s Strategic Plan. The Assessment Programme also supports scholarship activity in assessment, bringing benefits in terms of greater awareness of the issues and impact of assessment on students.

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 Module assessment is carried out via a range of standard assessment tasks, including:
   • assignments
     o tutor-marked assignments (TMAs), which can be formative (where the TMA is zero weighted) or summative (where the TMA score contributes to the final score);
     o the end-of-module TMA (emTMA), which is the final assessed task for some modules where there is only one component of assessment (see point 5);
     o interactive computer-marked assignments (iCMAs) which can also be formative or summative
   • dissertations

1 Links to external and internal websites were checked in May 2020.
Some web links referred to in this document may be intranet based and so restricted to Open University staff.
• exams
• oral assessments
• portfolios
• practical assessments
• projects.

These tasks are used to make up the components of assessment.

5 Some modules have only one component of assessment, which is made up of a number of tasks that students complete during the module. There may be just one type of task — for example, assignments only. Or there may be more than one type of task — for example, assignments and an exam. Scores from these tasks are used to calculate a single Overall Score.

6 Other modules have two distinct components of assessment:
   i. The continuous assessment component is the tasks (i.e. assignments) students complete during the module. The scores of these assignments are combined to give an overall continuous assessment score (OCAS).
   ii. The examinable component is a task completed at the end of the module (i.e. the end-of-module assessment task). This final examinable piece of work may be a project, portfolio or dissertation (generically known as an end-of-module assessment or EMA) or an exam. The score from this task is the overall examinable score (OES).

The OCAS and OES are both used to calculate the module result.

7 If a module requires both assessment components (continuous assessment and an examinable component), students not only need to attain a pass/particular score for the combination of the two elements of assessment (rank score), but also to reach a pass/particular score on each component individually.

**Awarding Authority**

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

9 For each of the University’s modules there is a formally constituted Module Result 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 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 should be aware of;
• makes recommendations on the conduct of controlled and continuous assessments in future presentations.

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2 It should be noted that the end-of-module assessment (EMA) is not the same as an end-of-module TMA (emTMA). Both are final assessed tasks, but they are used in different ways depending on the module’s assessment strategy.
The award of module results is based on performance in the assessment tasks. The MRP has available to it:

- scores for individual assessment tasks;
- final score for the component(s) of assessment;
- information about any special circumstances that may have affected a student’s performance;
- information about the script markers and the distribution of 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 Classification 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.

The Module Results Approval and Qualifications Classification Panel (MRAQCP) is responsible, on behalf of Senate, for receiving recommendations from CEABs and ratifying and approving the award 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.
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 through a range of Student Policies and Regulations. The University’s arrangements for the assessment of students comply with the UK Quality Code.

For taught modules, module-specific information on assessment is sent to students at the start of the module. 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 usually submitted for University approval around two years prior to the first presentation. The approval process requires the module team to specify:

- the number and relative weighting of tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) i.e. the continuously assessed student work which is marked, graded and commented on by tutors, and interactive computer marked assignments (iCMAs);
- examination type (script/computer marked, oral) or the nature of the end-of-module assessment, its length, cut-off date, weighting and marking;
- task-specific threshold scores;
- result statuses (e.g. merit, distinction);
- special arrangements for students with disabilities, including provision for alternative arrangements.

Senate principles for undergraduate qualifications state that undergraduate degrees should be designed with pathways that comprise mandatory study of 120 credits at each of OU Level 1, 2 and 3 (FHEQ³ level 4, 5 and 6). Taught masters degrees comprise 180 credits of study at masters level.

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**

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.

Undergraduate degree qualifications are classified as first, upper second, lower second or third class. The majority of postgraduate qualifications are awarded with pass, merit, or distinction. Undergraduate qualifications are classified using result grades from OU (or

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³ Framework for Higher Education Qualifications – see Factsheet 2
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.

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 are two components 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 [UK Quality Code](https://qualitycode.ac.uk/).

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 Result 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, EMAs and emTMAs 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 four 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.

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. The criteria for nomination and appointment are monitored by the Policy Advice Centre, which also maintains a register of appointments and periods of tenure. Length of appointment varies, but normally with a four-year maximum.

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 module team;

• to ensure that each tutor’s 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 tutors and to share good practice in tuition;

• to enable the Module Result Panel to see the way in which the module and its assessment has been received by students and tutors.

The monitor, who is usually a member of academic and nations 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 areas of limitation. 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.

The monitoring process is supported by statistical data. This includes the TTGAR (Tutor TMA Grade Analysis 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.