University Students Consultative Forum

Consultation on Assessment
11–25 January 2015

Summary
Record of contributions

The complete record of the discussion can be viewed on the [forum](#). There were 431 posts by students. 50 students made at least 1 post. There were 136 ratings. Some of the most ‘liked’ posts:

- **Simple answer: no.**
- **More detailed answer: no way, please!**
- **[on peer assessment]**

It all sounds fine if you aren’t the poor person trying to cope with a group which is mostly absent…my experience online has only been good when it’s planned to be asynchronous and your mark isn’t affected by someone else.

The key point here is informing people, in my opinion. Whatever strategy they use, it won’t suit all of us, but we should know what it is, at least!
Q1a: During the course of your first 120 credits with the Open University, how did you feel about the assessment tasks (e.g. TMAs, iCMAs, EMAs, exams)? For example, what was the most daunting aspect of assessment? Why?

Students feeling about assessment varied, with several finding tasks stressful, particularly after a long break from study, although some reported that this was less the case over time. There was plenty of positive feedback about the OU’s support for students in their level one assessments.

Some general points were made:
- Tutor support was important but sometimes feedback was variable.
- Being able to practise submission was helpful.
- Feedback on EMAs would be helpful.
- Exams at level 1 are important in preparing students for harder exams at higher levels.
- Advice on effective assessment technique can be helpful.
- Opinion was divided on the value of iCMAs

Daunting aspects of assessment:
- Exams, particularly if OCAS is high and a high mark could mean a high grade overall.
- Writing essays after a long break, or not having written any previously.
- Submitting in the right format.
- Summative TMAs where every mark available counts.
- iCMAs where a wrong click, or an answer wrongly phrased even if correct, could cost marks.
- Not understanding the conventions of criticism.
- Keeping within word limits.
- Referencing correctly.
- Lack of substitution meaning one TMA could bring your whole module grade down.
- Lack of clear guidance.
- Lack of time in exams – possibly means student skills are not properly assessed.
- The maze of background reading materials
Q1b: Thinking about your own experience and what you know of other students’ experiences, in your opinion why are some students more or less successful in completing assessment tasks?

It was pointed out that ‘success’ did not mean the same for every student.

Different assessment strategies suited different students, for example some seemed to do better in exams and others in continuous assessment. There was a discussion about the merits of different assessment strategies (summarised elsewhere) and the point was raised that EMAs should not be ‘just like long TMAs’ and not treated as such by students.

The most popular answer was that success depends on spending sufficient time for either the assessment itself or for revising for an exam. The reasons for this may be outside of the student’s control, may be conscious or may be because they do not realise how much time is required to be successful. More successful students had sufficient time to go over material again. There were a couple of students who found more time spent didn’t necessarily equate to greater success.

The importance of reading and understanding the questions properly was also stressed.

Other points:

- Quality of tuition could make all the difference in assessment.
- A ‘risky’ approach to assessment tasks can result in a student being more or less successful but is a good learning experience, which is more likely in formative assessment.
- Ability and aptitude for a subject, plus a preparedness to think, were significant factors in how successfully assessment tasks are completed.
- Students sometimes do not understand that it is necessary to start preparations for an exam/EMA before the final TMA is submitted.
- Having clear, upfront, easily accessible information and examples helps students to be successful.
- Experience of assessment tasks in other modules could be helpful.
- Asking general questions of peers/tutors to clarify misinterpretations or misunderstandings was helpful.
Q1b ctd : Thinking about your own experience and what you know of other students’ experiences, in your opinion why are some students more or less successful in completing assessment tasks?

Other suggested reasons for students being less successful:

- Failure to follow guidelines or act on feedback from previous assessments, sometimes because that feedback not been provided on time or is unclear.
- Exam nerves, stress and memory issues.
- The distraction of an upcoming exam/EMA either in the same or another module.
- Those studying ‘for fun’ skipping bits of assessment they don’t enjoy.
- Lack of effort if the mark would not count or not significantly count towards their final mark.
- Ambiguity of questions or accompanying guidance.
- In essays, being descriptive rather than analytical and evaluative, and being insufficiently selective about what to include.
- Students being unable to find the guidance available.
- In exams, where there is no choice of questions.
- Lack of understanding of what students are being assessed on.
- Very occasionally a poor student-tutor relationship could lead to poor marks (which could be corrected on appeal) so anonymised marking would give more confidence.
- Using the same strategy as for a TMA on an EMA.
- Too much concentration on getting every last mark in TMAs, thereby neglecting general learning and EMAs/exams.
- Lack of compatibility with the teaching methods used.
- The bad luck of doing assessed group work with an ineffective group.
- Unhelpful, demotivating comments on forums.
- Trying to fit too much into the assessment.
- Not being able to attend face-to-face tutorials focused on assessment.
- Lack of confidence or organizational skills.
Q2a: Has the value of assessment and feedback been clear enough to you? How could we communicate and promote the value of assessment and feedback?

Students answering this question were clear about the value of feedback and in general thought the OU did a good job in stressing its importance, issues tended to arise when the feedback was not as useful as it might be.

Other points:
- More could be done to promote the value of assessment as an aid to understanding, with data provided.
- Assessed reflection on using feedback from a previous TMA was not helpful.
- Unhelpful feedback was not valuable and brought into question further feedback from the same person.
- Sometimes students did not want to look at feedback because it would be upsetting. ‘How to deal with feedback’ was an important skill.
- It would be useful if students were more aware that the quality of feedback was being monitored.
- It would be useful if students were given more guidance on what could be done when feedback was not offered within 10 working days.

Suggestions for promoting the value of assessment and feedback included:
- By providing good, timely feedback!
- Linking the development of knowledge and skills to individual assessments.
- Allowing a draft plus resubmission for a TMA on some modules.
- Having tutors lead discussions on it.
- Incorporating into the module some general feedback on TMA 1 after it’s been completed and some pointers as to how that feedback could be used for TMA 2.
- Analyse data about students who have not downloaded one or more of their TMAs (and hence can't have read feedback) versus those who have. If they perform less well on the module publicise this result to students.
- Including it in TMA guidelines and using the study planner to provide a tick box for revisiting feedback from previous assignment (acknowledging some would tick it anyway).
- The TMA itself should mention that the tutor will provide useful feedback on responses and to look out for it. The TMA collection system can also provide a reminder and perhaps in the PT3 form the tutor could mention specifically that there is feedback on the TMA script s/he is returning.
Q2b: How could we make feedback more useful for you in preparing for your next/subsequent TMAs (as well as your exam/EMA)?

- Feedback must be timely – there are too often delays.
- Good practice should be shared amongst tutors including student-nominated model feedback.
- It is very helpful to be offered the opportunity to follow up feedback with your tutor.
- Specific feedback providing action points of what could be done better was essential (even if marks are already high).
- Feedback should be tailored to a student’s specific learning goals based on an early conversation, for example, an appreciation that some students were aiming for high marks not just to pass. An example of good practice in languages was cited where students were asked at the start of their module for preferences in format of feedback.
- Examples of helpful feedback included reassurance that reasoning was sound even if the answer was wrong, extra examples given of correct answers even when full marks had been given, other examples and references, model answers or answer plan, areas of strength and weakness in a particular assignment relating to the overall module aims, linking to online resources to improve study skills.
- A positive tone is helpful but praise should not be trivial e.g. for submitting the assignment.
- A general feedback tutorial would be helpful to some students but not others. Written general feedback could be very helpful but should be supplementary to individual feedback.
- Feedback should make it clear why you have lost marks and it would be helpful to have greater clarity in advance of what marks would be awarded for. Feedback should reflect the mark – there is sometimes a mis-match.
- Sections cut and pasted into feedback was not helpful as it wasn’t clear if it was individually relevant or not. It is better to incorporate a ‘to everyone’ section in the PT3.
- Audio feedback should only be given if students have stated a preference for this instead of or as well as written feedback. However, it is essential for speaking TMAs in language modules.
- Time to reflect on previous feedback was necessary, but not always available, and could be built into modules.
- Feedback could have a more structured summary e.g. bullet points on what was done well, what wasn’t done well, goals for the next assignment etc.
- The SEAM survey did not adequately allow students to comment on feedback, and it was suggested student views should be integrated into the monitoring of ALs marking and feedback, or that they should be able to provide more immediate views on the value of their feedback.
Q3a: As you study a module, are there sufficient opportunities to learn and practice the skills and techniques you need for your final Exam or EMA? Of these skills, what are, or would be, the most useful to you?

There was some positive feedback about information on skills and techniques already available, although some felt additional opportunities should be made available. Additional points made:

- There tend to be more opportunities to practice exam skills than for EMAs, which require integration of knowledge and skills from across the module. This skill is not developed in continuous assessment.
- The difference in assessment objectives between TMAs and EMAs should be clearly flagged up.
- Late TMAs were often a distraction from EMAs/exams particularly if feedback on these was not received in good time.
- It would be good at module start to look forward to exam expectations / module themes etc as a basis for study.
- Feedback on EMAs was helpful when provided and should be more widespread.
- In certain subjects e.g. accounting, more time should be allocated to practicing techniques.
- Essay planning should be taught and practiced as part of assignment writing in a way that could be applied in an exam.

Cited as useful:

- Exam practice e.g. using past exam papers, an additional optional TMA that was a mock exam (T207), exam practice as in DST206 or using iCMAs.
- Pre-recorded lectures where each lecture was on a different topic and had a summary of the key facts as well as worked-through examples of questions from a past exam paper - with the opportunity to try the question yourself before watching the answer (S330).
- One or two formative pieces of work on the way to the EMA e.g. submitting a plan for the EMA as an earlier assignment.
- The grading of an anonymous piece of work against the assessment criteria.
- A mindset that an exam was simply three TMAs, so nothing to worry about.
- Practical exam work via day schools or online e.g. need for an essay plan, time management.
- Revision forums, with the opportunity to ask questions, and revision tutorials, going through typical answers or key concepts of the module.
- Detailed guidance as to how the exam would actually work.
Q3b: In the revision weeks before an examination, should we offer more module-specific, structured revision activities for you to work through? If yes, what should these focus on?

There was positive feedback about support and preparation activities currently offered. The revision activity cited as most useful for exams was practice/mock/past papers and more of these would be useful. Additional points made:

- Some optional activities might be useful, provided it is clear that these are not the only way to revise and students should be encouraged to find their own techniques.
- It would be difficult to prepare structured activities suitable for the range of students taking the module but these could cover both skills and key concepts.
- More time needs to be allocated to revision on the study planner, starting earlier, although it was also pointed out that starting revision activities too early might distract from the other module materials.
- There was a discussion about the general requirement to hand write for exams.

Suggestions for improvement:

- More time between the final TMA and the EMA or exam.
- More help with exam technique, particularly for people (L1 or L2) who have not taken an exam for a long time.
- Better signposting to the guidance and activities already available.
- Online forum-based exam essay plan discussions.
- Help in preparation for time management in an exam.
- For intermediate language EMAs that are 100% speaking, there is not enough opportunity to practice this. A 1:1 opportunity to practice with a tutor in the lead up to the EMA would be helpful.
- Mock exams in tutorials or at residential school.
- Online skills-based tutorials specifically focused on the exam or EMA.
- Facilitated revision sessions where groups of students and tutors could meet up.
- Structured revision guides with sample papers and suggested responses.
- More opportunities for face-to-face exam preparation / consolidation sessions.
- Feedback from iCMAs would be helpful.
- Mock exam questions for each block.
- Advice about different revision techniques (possibly with activities) should be built into the module at regular intervals.
Feedback from students about their experience of group work was mainly negative but with some positive experiences. There was a strong feeling that collaborative work should not be assessed, particularly not collectively. The most common reason cited for this negative experience was that other students were not necessarily able to participate (or chose not to) resulting in a frustrating experience for all involved and an uneven workload.

Points made:

• It was unfair to allocate everyone in a group the same mark for a particular piece of work as contributions varied so much. Students should be marked individually.

• Positive experiences of group work were largely face-to-face, particularly at residential schools. It would be useful if group work could be set up so that groups had the opportunity to meet face-to-face at the start.

• Group work worked better when it was asynchronous, however this was also problematic for students who were behind (or just a bit later) and trying to catch up when everything has already been said. Perhaps groups should be allocated according to students’ availability.

• Providing ‘opportunities for students to demonstrate skills in collaborative working’ should not be conflated with making assessed group work compulsory.

• There was an issue with group work being dominated by a particular individual.

• If taking part in collaborative activities must be assessed it should be a yes/no or 10%/0% mark for participating or not.

• Optional assessed collaborative activities might be good for those wanting to develop and demonstrate the relevant transferable employability skills.

• Where collaborative working was useful e.g. creative writing, it was important that this was structured for students to get the most out of it e.g. by having large enough forums for discussion, not limited to tutor group forums.

• If virtual attendance is mandatory for certain weeks then they need to be flagged in advance of someone signing up for a module, preferably with options available.

• Collaborative work could be helpful in providing peer support and helping students feel less isolated.

• Collaborative work does not allow students to work at their own pace and can be very slow waiting for responses.

• Collaborative working could be helpful in developing skills and making students more comfortable with group work.

• There was a question of what was actually being assessed – was it the collaborating skills (and if so how were these assessed) or was it the outcome of the collaborative work – as these could be very different.
Q4b: Do you think the University should include more peer review/assessment? Why do you think this? Could peer assessment replace tutor-marked assessment for some TMAs?

- Students were strongly opposed to peer assessment, particularly the proposal that this should replace TMAs.
- The major reason given (for neither wanting to give nor receive peer assessment) was that students did not have sufficient knowledge, understanding and experience to mark another student’s work. Other reasons were:
  - It was suggested that if giving feedback or applying a mark scheme was seen as an important skill, students should be asked to apply this to an anonymous piece of work with no implications for anyone else’s overall mark. Discussing an anonymous piece of work could also be helpful. Tutor-led threads on exemplar TMAs could help students develop their reviewing skills.
  - Students were more positive about peer review, where another student’s comments on a piece of work could be helpful. This was, to a certain extent, subject dependent, with peer review more valid in areas such as creative writing where non-expert feedback was useful. However it was important that this was monitored by a tutor to avoid unhelpful feedback being taken on board.
  - Peer review could be a sensitive area with students not wanting to post hurtful feedback and therefore withholding criticism or alternatively feeling they did need to point out every mistake; and on the other hand students feeling very upset by public comments about their work. This is more likely to be the case at undergraduate level. There was also a potential issue with lack of awareness of disability.
  - There was an example of good practice peer review in L161 where students look at a previous year’s completed assignment. Also in B201 and SD815 and where peer comments were filtered by the tutor before being passed on.
  - Peer review exercises should bear in mind students’ different learning styles e.g. for some there would be no ‘first draft’ for peers to comment on.
  - Peer review could be time-consuming for students in a way which did not help them with their studies.

I would not sign up for a module with peer assessment as my peers are not qualified to mark my work.

The thought (and implications) of marking someone else’s work makes me feel very nervous.

Informal feedback and comments to help understand ideas and reflective practices have a role.
Q5: What are your comments on the proposal for assessment communications?

The major point was that greater clarity is required, reinforced by module teams, about weighting of OCAS and OES/EMA scores and how these contribute to the overall module grade. This should also be clear to enquirers as often this comes as a surprise. Misleading references to 50:50 weighting should be removed. Other points:

- Assessment strategy (particularly whether TMAs count towards your overall mark) should be available as part of the module information available in advance of registration. This information should also be stressed right at the start of the module.
- There was support for publishing assessment deadlines as early as possible, preferably pre-registration.
- All the information should be easy to find in a standard format at any time, as well as any timely signposting (possibly earlier than in the proposal referenced).
- Advice on file size, suggested fonts and sizes, margins, acceptable file types, naming files and other similar information should be included under the ‘first TMA’ section.
- Exemplar TMAs and EMAs would be helpful, including how criteria could be met.
- All assessments and materials should be made available at the start of week 1 to enable planning.
- The proposed information should explain the use of instant feedback ‘quizzes’ and informal ‘badges’.
- The proposal needs to ensure specific information for each module is included.
- Enquirers need to be told that there are deadlines for assignments and why there are so many.
- The 12 hour grace period for submissions could be clearer.
- Where a student is submitting late and has agreed that extension with the tutor it should be made clearer that it will flag up as a late submission on the TMA system when you go to submit.
- The lowest pass mark for each TMA/EMA/iCMA/exam should be flagged up at the appropriate point.
- Enquirers should be able to access more realistic ‘readiness’ tests.
- The rules around substitution, where it exists, should be better signposted.
- Any changes to assessment should be clearly communicated to all students they affect.
- Implications of failing a module for course progression and funding should be communicated at the results stage.
- This thread also strayed into a discussion of assessment strategy, where several students felt an average weighting of continuous assessment and exam/EMA would be ‘fairest’.
Other issues

• It was raised that there should be better information about the possibilities of postponements (with or without assessment banking). These are particularly important for students with health problems. It was noted that postponements may be becoming less available.

• A series of arguments (at http://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/discuss.php?d=71311#p892739) were put forward for threshold-formative as a better assessment strategy than the lower of OCAS/OES determining the grade. Other students supported this position.

• The view was expressed again here that it was hard on students who performed well in continuous assessment but not in the exam (or vice versa) that a very high mark in one or other could not ‘pull up’ the overall mark. Others thought it was important that the exam made such a significant contribution to ensure the quality of the degree against any allegations of possible cheating. Substitution used to help with one bad TMA mark early on pulling down the overall module mark.

Next steps

• Many thanks for your contributions to this forum. Your contributions will be considered by the Assessment Programme and the Assessment Credit and Qualifications Unit here at the OU. Along with further feedback that we are hoping to get from face to face consultations with students, this will inform the development of assessment practice and policy, in particular how modules are designed and the advice and guidance students receive.

• We will report back on how we plan to act on your feedback later in the year.