Smart Guide to Assessment
This booklet has been produced by the Learning and Teaching Unit in collaboration with staff from the Essex Futures programme who collected and analysed examples of current assessment practices from across the University.

Assessment has been the subject of intense interest from universities in recent years, with new formative types of assessment increasingly supplementing traditional summative forms. The Essay and the Exam are tried and tested methods, and still offer a great deal, but the potential of assessment for learning as opposed to assessment of learning is exciting. Any programme of study has room to accommodate alternative assessments that provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate the same skills – or different yet equally important skills – whilst learning something new in the process. Many lecturers are searching for the best and most engaging way to achieve this.

Lecturers at the University of Essex are no exception. Innovative and effective practices are being developed and refined in departments, the challenge is to ensure that the wider University community benefits from these ideas and experiences.

Since its inception, the Learning and Teaching Unit has been involved in the dissemination of good practice. This Smart Guide – the sixth in the series – is intended to continue that process and open up the silos of practice. It is also intended to promote and encourage submissions to the Good Practice Database (URL opposite), about which more information is provided later in this booklet.

What is this booklet about?

Content

Page 4 – Assessing Group Work (CSEE)

Page 5 – Assessing Group Work (EBS)

Page 5 – Forthcoming Workshops on Assessment

Page 6 – Group Assessment and Skills Assessment (AHT)

Page 7 – Presentation and Group Work Marking Policy

Page 8 – Self- and Peer-Assessment (EBS)

Page 9 – External Examples

Page 10 – Assessing Skills (CSES)

Page 11 – Assessing Skills (Government)

Page 12 – Resources at Essex
Assessment is one of the cornerstones of higher education, but well-designed assessment is crucial to the provision of enjoyable and meaningful education. It is often the organising principle of a programme of study, determining the structure and rhythm of term. It offers students the opportunity to demonstrate ability whilst providing extra motivation to learn as much as possible over a short period. Without well-designed assessment, teaching staff are less able to judge the level of understanding and communication of our students and therefore provide meaningful feedback and make necessary interventions.

This booklet is intended to inspire new ideas and fresh approaches to assessment. It features a number of different types of assessment, but the majority are assessments that allow students to develop and practise key skills at the same time as learning substantive content, for which group work and presentations are particularly good. For those who wish to start thinking about some of the practical considerations of introducing new assessments, the excerpt from the University’s marking policy should provide a useful starting point.

Much of the content in this booklet was identified as good practice by a project team from Essex Futures, a development programme for academic and professional services staff that I introduced in the 2008/09 academic year. The aim of the programme is to develop the career paths of participants and to explore how they can shape the future of our University through innovation and collaboration. In this spirit, the team responsible for this booklet comprised staff from different departments: Lisa Jack and Pik Liew from Essex Business School, Vikki-Jo Porteous-Butler from Health and Human Sciences, and Owen Robinson from Literature, Film and Theatre Studies. The principle of collaboration extended even further, involving the Learning and Teaching Unit in the booklet’s production. Collaborative work of this kind, with its potential to propagate good practice, cross-pollinate ideas, and forge lasting professional partnerships, will, I am sure, be of lasting benefit to the University.

I hope you find this booklet informative and continue to explore new ways to provide our students with an inspiring, high-quality education.

Prof. Colin Riordan, Vice Chancellor

These examples of assessment methods and practices in departments, plus many more, are available on the Good Practice Database: www.essex.ac.uk/goodpractice
One of the School’s core second-year modules is assessed by a group project which aims to simulate a typical working environment. Lecturers organise students into groups of six according to academic track-record and nationality, ensuring a ‘realistic’ mix of proficiency and ethnicity. This approach gives the higher-performing students the opportunity to support peers, whilst lower-performing students have the chance to be mentored.

Each group is given a substantial brief with enough elements for successful completion to require careful delegation and forward planning. The brief includes weekly deliverables. The total quantity of group work expected is equivalent to six normal module assignments.

Groups must manage their projects in a professional way. Someone is allocated overall responsibility for each specific task and area, with Microsoft Project used to ensure detailed action-planning. At the beginning of the process, students undertake individual skills audits (both technical and non-technical), which are used to allocate responsibilities. The group is required to hold weekly meetings with a rotating chair and secretary – details of the time and place of the meeting must be published in case the supervising lecturer wishes to attend.

To help manage information, groups are given a dedicated network drive to which each member has access. To ensure that everyone in the group is up-to-date with the project at each weekly juncture, all students are required to submit the weekly deliverable. Staff then run a quick automatic check to ensure that all six versions are the same; if not, the group is required to explain the discrepancy. Feedback is given by staff at each milestone.

The overall student mark for the group project is made up of an individual mark and a group mark. The individual mark is worth 60% of the total and is based on a summative reflective report, an individual presentation or micro-viva, an examination and the ongoing performance and contribution of the student as observed by the supervising lecturer. The group mark is worth 40% of the total and is awarded pro rata on the basis of attendance and contribution made.

As one student says, ‘The focus on making the group-work as real as possible gave a real insight into what working on a project would be like; the difficulties that can arise when a team member fails to perform; how easy it is to achieve a relatively difficult goal when all the team members work together.’

For further information contact Iain Langdon (ilangdon@essex.ac.uk).
Group-work helps students to develop a range of transferable skills and places responsibility for learning on the learner. In addition, it provides students with an opportunity to describe their project and identify important skills and experience acquired during the process. Many students find assignments focusing on group-work and presentation more meaningful than writing-based assessments because they consider them to be more akin to ‘real life’.

**Teacher perspective**
It is important to assure students that the method for awarding group and individual marks is fair and reliable, and that contributions to both the final mark and project processes are vital. Like CSEE’s group-work task on the page opposite, each group must take minutes for every meeting. The teacher needs to work closely with the group leader (whether elected or alternating) to ensure that the process is functioning well and to check that the group’s minute book contains all signatures agreeing each course of action.

**Student perspective**
The majority of students (67%) feel that group-work helps them gain key transferable skills required by employers; students also feel that they learn and develop personal and transferable skills from the group presentation. By way of caution, a very small minority of students can feel antagonised, oppressed, or constrained by group-work; unable to make their voices heard and to contribute as they would like. However, the main challenge for teaching staff is to ensure objectivity when assessing and awarding marks, both joint and individual. The allocations and criteria need to be very clear.

For further information contact Dr Pik Liew (pliew@essex.ac.uk).

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**Forthcoming Workshops on Assessment** - Visit www.essex.ac.uk/ltu/events

- **Assessing Group Oral Presentations**, Lisa Wade, 20 October 2009 *
- **Learning Through Reflection**, Alan Mortiboys, 27 October 2009
- **How Students Learn**, Dave Wilkinson, 9 November 2009
- **Developing Learning Outcomes**, Dave Wilkinson, 9 November 2009
- **My Friend Said We Didn’t Have to Pass Everything…**, Deanna Walker, 3 March 2010
- **Assessing Group Projects**, Iain Langdon and Keith Primrose, 15 April 2010 *
- **Learning Outcomes: Keeping it Real**, Liz Warr, 21 April 2010
- **Developing Transferable Skills**, Kate Exley, 11 May 2010
- **Curriculum Design and Development**, Alan Mortiboys, 18 May 2010
- **Alternative Assessment Strategies**, Alan Mortiboys, 18 May 2010

*Asterixed (*) workshops relate to case studies in this booklet*
The Department of Art History and Theory has redesigned its two compulsory modules for first-year undergraduates so that academic and employability skills development is embedded in the curricula. Two principles underpinned the redesigning of the modules: firstly, that development opportunities are embedded, as students are disinclined towards bolt-on, optional skills courses; secondly, that opportunities cover employability and demonstrate that Art History is a highly vocational humanities subject.

The assessment for each module now focuses on a specific group of skills. AR100 (Greatest Hits: Case Studies in the History of Art) aims to develop writing ability by assessing a variety of written work, including a portfolio which comprises an exhibition proposal, a literature review, critiques, catalogue notes, and other redrafting and précising exercises. AR111 (Art, Sex and Death in the Eighteenth Century) focuses on group work and oral presentations, each constituting 50% of the assessment. Students focus on the development of a particular skill throughout the whole module, in tandem with the course content, which remains unaltered.

Focus on the development of skills goes beyond just the means of assessment. A number of seminars for AR100 are dedicated to developing certain skills and undertaking personal development planning (PDP); students are encouraged to spend time reflecting on and updating an electronic skills record. Supported by an accompanying website, AR100 and AR111 also familiarise students with online resources, learning technologies, and the University’s virtual learning environment (VLE), Moodle. Because the AR100 module is assessed by 100% written coursework, the Spring term is dedicated to the development and acquisition of further key skills in art history, and students are required to complete exercises in practical criticism, while their knowledge is tested in preparation for the second year.

From the outset responses from students have been extremely positive; they have immediately grasped the rationale and purpose of the new methods of teaching and assessment, not only distinguishing between generic and transferable skills but also understanding how the two interact with each other. In the most recent survey, 100% of students who responded enjoyed the assessments and preferred them to traditional forms. 100% felt their academic and transferable skills were enhanced. From a staff perspective the modules may require careful planning but are ‘deeply rewarding’.

The main objective of the AR100 module is to introduce a number of key artworks and associated concepts whilst also providing an overarching perspective on the social-historical context in which the visual arts evolved. None of this has been compromised by the change in assessment and seminar teaching; on the contrary, the Department sees the development of these skills as an investment, enabling full immersion in subject matter in the second and third years, which is most effective when students have reached the necessary level of expressive capability and are equipped with the appropriate tools.

For further information contact Lisa Wade (lisaw@essex.ac.uk).
## Presentation and Group Work Marking Policy for Taught Students

The following are the University’s minimum requirements for marking assessed presentations and group-work. Departments may wish to double-mark more work or be required to do so by a professional body.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment type</th>
<th>Marking Protocol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performance-based coursework with a permanent output, capable of being shown to the External Examiner</td>
<td>Single marked (but moderation needed for GTAs, new staff*, and assessed coursework titles marked by multiple staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance-based coursework with a non-permanent output worth up to and including 40% of a single module, which contributes to a student’s degree classification</td>
<td>Single marked (but moderation needed for GTAs, new staff*, and assessed coursework titles marked by multiple staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance-based coursework with a non-permanent output that contributes to more than 40% of a single module, which contributes to a student’s degree classification</td>
<td>Double-marked or team marked, or video/audio recorded or attended by the External Examiner based on 100% coverage of the whole cohort.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group work with a permanent output</td>
<td>Single marked (but moderation needed for GTAs, new staff*, and assessed coursework titles marked by multiple staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group work with a non-permanent output that contributes up to and including 40% of a single module, which contributes to a student’s degree classification</td>
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<td>Double-marked or team marked, or video/audio recorded or attended by the External Examiner.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*It is for departments to determine how long moderation needs to continue for a new member of staff.

Registry, May 08  
Policy approved by the Graduate and Undergraduate School Boards in May 2008.

The full policy can be accessed online:  
www.essex.ac.uk/quality/pages/UGAssessmentPolicyAPPENDIX.htm
The tasks were designed to assist in the development of a whole range of skills, including communication, observation, professional judgement and responsibility, and self-evaluation and self-criticism. In particular, the tasks facilitate reflection and contribute to lifelong learning.

**Teacher Perspective**

This approach can be used effectively as a summative assessment in which students are required to submit the self- and peer-assessment components as part of their submission of the larger assessment. While self- and peer-assessment may not be appropriate for use as the sole or primary assessment of students’ learning, when used in conjunction with a more rigorous method they can offer useful insights into attitude and level of confidence to apply subject knowledge.

**Student Perspective**

As one student says, “peer-assessment gave me an insight into how the tutor marks a paper”. The ability of students to read their own work from the perspective of the tutor and to consider criteria such as structure and expression in a more objective way is undoubtedly desirable. Another students states that “the self-assessment helps to clarify ideas and to structure the assignment. Besides that, you can use the marking criteria to judge whether you have answered the question.” The opportunity to read the work of peers and to explore their strengths and weaknesses was seen as positive.

As reported by students, a potential issue with self- and peer-assessment is inflation and deflation of marks. One potential manifestation of this is students awarding themselves very high marks and their peers very low marks. This can be minimised by having a veto system (see example from the University of Glamorgan on the page opposite), and in practice does not represent a legitimate concern. Another consideration is that some students may feel that they do not have the expertise or the confidence to judge the work of their peers and “suggest anything that would be beneficial to friends”. Teachers must find their own way to help students appreciate the value of their own inexpert judgement, and the usefulness of their differing strengths and weaknesses.

For further information contact Dr Pik Liew (pliew@essex.ac.uk)
The Performed Essay at Aberystwyth

The Department of Theatre, Film and Television at Aberystwyth University has introduced a ‘performed essay’ task as part of a second-year module to get students to consider the relationship between a piece of academic writing and a presentation, and explore their similarities and differences. For the first assignment of the module, students write a typical academic essay, the subject of which is negotiated with the tutor and is of particular interest to the student. For the second module assessment, students are required to re-articulate their essay in the form of a presentation that is as creative as possible whilst still conveying the key arguments. Students are marked on the manifestation of an imaginative intellectual reworking of an academic argument, their application of performative elements in the re-articulation, and the overall persuasiveness of their presentation.

Source: HEA website

Innovative Self-Assessment at Glamorgan

A compulsory first-year undergraduate Law module at the University of Glamorgan now includes a new assessment component to encourage students to participate in class and develop class-related academic skills. 40% of the mark for the module is allocated for participation, but students themselves award this mark, submitting a reflective rationale which argues their case. Mark inflation is protected against by staff allocating their own mark, which vetoes the mark the student has given if the two marks do not fall within the same range (for example 5% or 10%); if the marks are similar, the student’s mark stands. A dry-run of this is undertaken in the middle of the module where students mark themselves and are given a mark from the tutor along with feedback. This form of assessment has been popular with students as it raises the stakes for in-class engagement and encourages ownership of the assessment. It also introduces students to reflection and PDP (Personal Development Planning) whilst developing the kind of study skills which form the basis of future academic success.

Source: HEA website
**Background**

The Centre for Sports and Exercise Science has a programme of skills-focused modules that run over the course of degree programmes. The second year module, Skills for Sports Science (BS216), aims to develop skills (and awareness of the skills) that are crucial for a sports scientist. Assessment for the module is 100% coursework and comprises a number of elements. 65% of the overall mark assumes that students have attended the Sports Science Summer School at the end of the first year. These marks are comprised of: (i) satisfactory attendance and participation (6.5%), (ii) a group oral presentation (13%), and (iii) production of a report in scientific paper format (45.5%).

Of the remaining marks, 15% is awarded for a series of tasks based on Career Planning and Personal Development Planning (PDP): (i) production of a CV (4%), (ii) production of a model job description and person specification (5%), (iii) production of a career action plan (4%), and (iv) participation in research (2%). The other 20% of the total mark is reserved for demonstration of sufficient ability with statistics, data analysis and scientific communication, measured by worksheets (15%) and a poster presentation (5%).

**Teacher Perspective**

Having several discrete elements comprise the total mark for the module requires careful coordination between staff so that no variability or inconsistencies appear in the marking. For this to be effective, a reliable and clear marking system is essential. Careful planning is also needed to avoid the workload becoming overburdensome (though the approach is believed to be less time-consuming than more ‘traditional’ assessments). The online assessments that are used for PDP require a significant number of computers to be available at the same time, which generates administrative workload. These issues aside, the module gives students greater confidence in later assignments and learning, and reinforces the link between academic work (the now) and the ‘real world’ (the future). The ‘research participation’ component in particular is valuable to students, requiring them to: (a) participate in a third-year research project; (b) not only arrive on time but demonstrate readiness to take part; and (c) attend everything – marks are only awarded for full attendance, all marks being lost if a single session is missed without a very good reason. Underpinning the module is a strong belief in the need to vary assessments so that students are given credit for the full range of their skills, both practical and academic.

**Student Perspective**

The majority of students feel that the module enhances their learning and transferable skills, such as delivering presentations. The workload is considered manageable, and the majority of students like the mix of traditional and non-traditional methods of assessment; 33% would have been happy to have exclusively non-traditional forms of assessment. However, the relevance of ‘non-traditional’ assessments and transferable skills is not always recognised and understood; it is necessary to make clear why acquisition and assessment of these skills is important before graduation and entry into the job market. Responses to particular aspects of the coursework is variable: for example, while some students loved the group-work component, others loathed it. This re-emphasises the need to explain the importance of certain skills to students – and how the benefits of development sometimes outweighs enjoyment.

Dr Martin Sellens (sellm@essex.ac.uk).
Background

The Department of Government’s first-year module, Introduction to International Relations (GV103), assesses students through a combination of traditional and non-traditional methods. Students write two conventional essays during the year, which count for 30% of the final grade, and sit an end-of-year exam worth 50%. The remaining 20% is accounted for in two ways: (1) by a 5% attendance and participation mark that takes into account the quality and quantity of contributions as judged by the class tutor, and (2) by three study skills assignments which cumulatively count for 15% of the final grade: assignment 1 is a 750-word summary of the arguments of a specified journal article; assignment 2 is a thorough outline of the first essay; and assignment 3 is a referencing and bibliography task. In addition, two study skills sessions are organised (on essay writing and structure) which complement the skills assignments.

These assessed components have been in place for a few years now, and are used both as a means of developing study skills and as a way of identifying and monitoring the progress of students who have problems in these areas. These students are referred to the Department’s Study Skills Officer for specific support, which continues to be available as appropriate through subsequent years.

Staff Perspective

The assessment methods help to improve referencing and essay-writing skills, and focus minds on the module – and other modules – while very little is added to the workload. The summary exercise in particular is demonstrably beneficial to new students. The essay-planning exercise, on the other hand, will be revised in the coming year due to limited perceived success. Gauging whether participation is improved through these methods is also problematic as attendance remains polarised between attendees and regular non-attendees. The current weighting of 5% is perceived to be too low to make a significant difference to attitudes towards attendance and engagement – something in the order of 20% is deemed more likely to be effective.

Student Perspective

The most recent Student Assessment of Courses and Teaching registered broad support among students for the use of skills development-focused methods of assessment: 69% of respondents like the use of non-traditional methods on the module; 77% say that non-traditional methods enhance their learning, while 61% say that study skills are enhanced. A number of respondents feel that the study skills exercises are useful for looking at a topic from different angles, and particularly good preparation for essay-writing. The general feeling is that non-traditional forms of assessment significantly improve performance in traditional forms of assessment, specifically essay-writing. This suggests that a mixture of the two may be the best way to organise first-year modules, especially if second- and third-year modules are assessed by more traditional means. Student attitudes towards attendance and participation marks are divided: although 62% feel that they are an incentive to greater involvement in seminars, criticisms range from the assertion that participation should not be assessed to the claim that motivation is unaltered by the limited marks awarded.

For further information contact Dr Kevin Wright (wrigka@essex.ac.uk).
Resources at Essex

mySkills
www.essex.ac.uk/myskills

The University’s academic skills website is a growing source of guidance material and exercises for students, to be used independently or as part of a module or course. The majority of the content can be easily adapted for use in classes and seminars by tutors.

There is a subsection of the website dedicated to each of the following key academic skills areas: studying; lectures; seminars; presentations; feedback; research; reading; writing; language; and referencing. Most sections include activities and interactive guidance, including short films of students expressing their opinions about the relevant area.

Encourage your students to use mySkills. Email Richard Yates (ryates@essex.ac.uk) if you would like to contribute or comment on the website.

Good Practice Database
www.essex.ac.uk/goodpractice

As mentioned at the beginning of this booklet, staff at the University have access to a searchable online Good Practice Database, which has a theme dedicated to assessment.

The Database is home to many ideas, innovations, and examples of good practice that have been collected from across the University, which are also available in PDF format as Smart Guides such as this one.

Visit the Learning and Teaching Unit website: www.essex.ac.uk/ltu/resources

The examples that currently feature are neither definitive nor prescriptive. The Database is a tool to facilitate continuous update and improvement; to assist in the exchange of dialogue about good practice across the whole University. To this end, both critiques of existing examples and contributions of new examples are welcomed.