

# Explaining student workload

Guidance about providing information for students

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## Introduction

The provision of information for prospective and current students<sup>1</sup> is a topic that has attracted increasing attention following policy changes giving UK students greater responsibility for funding their own higher education.<sup>2</sup> Accessible, reliable and trustworthy information is necessary to ensure that prospective students understand the nature of the learning experience they can expect on particular programmes from a higher education provider. The provision of appropriate information enables applicants to make informed choices in the light of their career aspirations and preferred learning styles, and ensures that the investment they make will be based on an accurate understanding of what is offered.

## About this guidance

This guidance, published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), is one of a suite of publications intended to help providers ensure that transparent and helpful information is available about the teaching methods and learning opportunities associated with their higher education programmes. The provision of such information gives applicants an understanding of the teaching and learning methods, support and contact time, learning opportunities and workload that they can expect to experience while studying for particular qualifications.

The publications offer detailed guidance on providing information about the following topics:

- *Explaining staff teaching qualifications*
- *Explaining class size*
- *Explaining students' workload* (this publication)
- *Responding to feedback from students*

The guidance is intended to be of practical help to programme leaders, quality assurance professionals, academic registrars, educational development practitioners, marketing departments and others involved in providing and managing information for prospective and current students.

The four publications for providers are complemented by a companion set of guides for students on the same themes:

- *Information on staff teaching qualifications: a student guide*
- *Information on class size: a student guide*
- *Information on workload: a student guide*
- *Information on how you can comment on your course: a student guide*

Providers should endeavour, wherever possible, to make clear information available to prospective and current students about the teaching and learning experience, programme structure and the qualifications of the staff who will support that experience. When publishing such information, providers should refer to **Part C of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education**, which addresses how providers make available information that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy, in relation to wider information.

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<sup>1</sup> See Part C of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

<sup>2</sup> Implementation of proposals in the UK government White Paper *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, June 2011).

The present guidance relates to information about higher education provision that providers publish on their websites and in their promotional material, as distinct from the Key Information Set (KIS) required by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DELNI).

## Using this guidance

Providers are encouraged to draw upon this guidance in considering their approach to providing information for prospective and current students regarding programme structure, academic support and workload. Such information should typically cover:

- the composition of learning programmes
- how different aspects of learning are supported by a range of staff qualified in different ways (including lecturers, tutors, librarians, visiting specialists, postgraduate students and technicians)
- what workload students can expect.

The guidance should be used to complement the Indicators and Expectations of the relevant Chapters of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, particularly Part C: Information about higher education provision and Chapters *B3: Learning and teaching*, *B5: Student engagement* and *B8: Programme monitoring and review*.

Research indicates that students generally have a well developed understanding of the variety of ways in which their learning is facilitated, together with other related issues, such as class size.<sup>3</sup> Since pedagogic approaches to higher education are therefore familiar to staff and students alike, the present guidance limits its discussion of them to indicative lists in the two appendices:

- Appendix 1: Indicative list of learning and teaching methods
- Appendix 2: Indicative list of assessment methods

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<sup>3</sup> Bekhradnia (2012), NUS (2012), QAA (2011).

## Students' views

In a survey of prospective and current students (1,926 respondents) commissioned by HEFCE in 2010 as part of its work on public information about higher education, students were asked to score the usefulness of around 50 pre-selected pieces of information. Nearly one-fifth (19 per cent) of students surveyed said that they would be interested to know the 'proportion of teaching in lectures with a class size over 100' that they would experience on a course;<sup>4</sup> 17 per cent said that they would be interested in knowing the 'proportion of first year teaching by professors'; and 38 per cent said that they would be interested in knowing the 'weekly hours of teaching contact time' on a course.

Research commissioned by HEFCE on prospective students' information needs suggested that 35 per cent of individuals surveyed (1,962) would find it helpful to know 'the proportion of overall assessment that would be conducted via coursework'.<sup>5</sup> Presenting this information in isolation would be unlikely to provide a balanced overall picture of the assessment on a course; the importance of presenting a more rounded picture in order to allow students to make informed decisions about what and where to study has already been emphasised.

The National Union of Students (NUS) has also conducted annual surveys of students' views over three years (in 2008, 2009 and 2010). Sample sizes in the NUS surveys are significantly smaller than for the National Student Survey (NSS), but the NUS surveys asked students specifically for their views about contact time. When asked whether they thought the contact hours they had received were appropriate, around 75 per cent of students surveyed felt that they were (75 per cent in 2008; 76 per cent in 2009; 78 per cent in 2010).<sup>6</sup> The results of the NSS have been consistently high, with an overall satisfaction rate of approximately 81 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

## Quality of the learning experience and student support

There is much debate about what constitutes a 'quality' learning experience and how this can be determined. In the context of higher education, quality is about providing an environment that creates the potential for students to succeed in their studies. This is essentially a subjective matter, and is more commonly measured in a qualitative rather than a quantitative way, and by a whole range of factors that include:

- support for individuals' needs and entitlements
- the quantity, quality and timeliness of feedback on assessed work
- the transparency of assessment criteria, allowing students to understand what is expected of them
- access to learning spaces and resources such as libraries, laboratories or design studios
- the availability of information and communications technology as an aid to learning
- the extent to which the institution takes account of students' feedback in making continual improvements to existing provision.

## Student achievement

A successful learning experience for a student should include the achievement of the desired qualification. Factors that influence educational achievement are multifarious and

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<sup>4</sup> Oakleigh, (2010).

<sup>5</sup> Oakleigh, (2010).

<sup>6</sup> National Union of Students, NUS (2008, 2009, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Results from the NSS are made publicly available on the Unistats website at: <http://unistats.direct.gov.uk>.

subjective, as are the determinants of quality. In addition to the learning opportunities that providers make available, other significant factors in determining achievement include:

- how prepared students are for higher education
- students' prior learning experiences and qualifications upon entry
- students' motivation to study and to seek help when they need it.<sup>8,9</sup>

Previous studies have illustrated the difficulty of trying to disaggregate the determinants of quality and student achievement, and advise caution in trying to assign a direct causal relationship between individual variables and student achievement.<sup>10,11</sup> Specifically around contact with staff, previous studies have suggested that the precise nature of interaction between students and staff may be particularly important to students' learning.<sup>12</sup>

This guide aims to highlight a range of factors that providers may find helpful to consider when providing information for prospective and current students regarding programme structure, academic support and workload.

## Providing the information that students expect

Prospective and current students are entitled to expect clear and transparent information about the nature of the learning experience offered by providers. This will include details of:

- the amount of support that students can expect
- methods of teaching, learning and assessment, including unsupervised study time
- the amount of programmed teaching and contact time that can be expected
- ways in which learning will be supported by resources and specialist facilities
- the workload that students can anticipate.

Part C: Information about higher education provision of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education includes the following general Expectation about the provision of information:

Higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the learning opportunities they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

## Explaining academic support for students

The provider's information should make clear the type and amount of support available to students. It should explain who will be giving the support (for example, lecturers, tutors and specialist support staff) and how much programmed time these staff will have available for students. It should also give details about the availability of drop-in services and online support, such as virtual learning environments.

,Approaches to teaching, learning and assessment vary across subjects and across higher education providers in the UK, leading to differences in the amount of programmed teaching and the number of tutorial hours included in different programmes. Providers are encouraged to communicate this information to students on their websites and in their prospectuses and programme handbooks.

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<sup>8</sup> Gibbs (, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Brennan et al., (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Gibbs, (2010).

<sup>11</sup> Brennan et al., (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Gibbs, (2010).

## Explaining approaches to learning and teaching

A range of approaches to learning and teaching are in use across UK higher education. This flexibility and diversity allows providers to:

- be responsive both to individuals and to cohorts of students
- take account of the latest developments in educational research and technology
- deliver courses in the most appropriate ways for the subject or area of practice
- accommodate different modes of course delivery (such as distance learning or e-learning).

Owing to the characteristics of particular disciplines, programmes in similar subjects may share common approaches to learning and teaching. Subjects with an emphasis on developing practical skills are likely to involve more scheduled sessions, enabling students to learn through demonstrations and supervised practice.

## Explaining independent learning

Higher education is distinguished from general and secondary education by its focus on independent learning. Scheduled learning and teaching activities typically feature alongside time in which students are expected to study independently. Independent study might include preparation for scheduled sessions, follow-up work, wider reading or practice, completion of assessment tasks, or revision. The relative amounts of time that students are expected to spend engaged in scheduled activities and independent study varies between courses.

In the provision of information for prospective students, it is important that the role of the student as a partner in learning is emphasised. The transition to higher education and the effective development of the required skills as an independent and autonomous learner requires a structured learning programme, with appropriate academic support at each stage, so that the learner is able to progress and demonstrate the appropriate outcomes. The learner must be an active participant in this process, and alerting students to the expectation about mutual responsibilities for learning should be a function of the published information about each course.

## Explaining assessment and feedback

Assessment of students' learning and the provision of feedback is a crucial component of a programme of study. There should be a strategic alignment in a programme of study between these aspects which is designed to enable students to acquire the key areas of knowledge, skills and understanding, and to demonstrate this acquisition via assessment of learning outcomes.

In higher education, the summative assessment of learning is a judgement regarding the achievement of outcomes in accordance with defined criteria, contributing to the award of a qualification by a recognised body. Assessment can also be formative, where the feedback provided by the assessor should be constructive and informative, highlighting where and how improvements can be made - giving support for future learning.

## Explaining programmed teaching and learning time

Providers are encouraged to publish information about the programmed teaching and learning time that prospective and current students can expect throughout their studies.

This is likely to include a description of the range of different methods of learning, teaching and assessment that a student is likely to encounter, the expectations of students as independent learners, and the typical number of hours that students should expect to spend studying overall.

Current information can be found through a variety of different means, including programme specifications, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) Entry Profiles, websites, prospectuses, and during open days. Information for current students may also be provided through a student charter or agreement, which identifies mutual expectations and obligations, and in programme handbooks.

When presenting information, providers are encouraged to explain the learning experience offered in a way that emphasises the holistic and complementary nature of the various activities of which it is comprised, together with the supporting infrastructure (for example libraries, learning support centres and virtual learning environments). The particular approach used could be framed within institutional or departmental teaching and learning strategies.

## Explaining contact time

The term 'contact hours' refers to the time allocated on learning programmes to direct contact between a student and a member of staff. This can occur in various different forms depending on its intended purpose. Contact time may also take a virtual rather than face-to-face form, through the use of email, email discussion groups, webinars, video conferencing and other web-based discussion forums.

The receipt of feedback on assessed work, whether one-to-one or in a group setting, can also be considered an important element of contact time which contributes to students' learning but may not be formally scheduled.

A lecture involves contact with a member of staff giving instruction to a large group of students, while teaching and learning in smaller groups allows closer interaction between students and a member of staff in the form of participatory discussion. A laboratory session, dance class, studio workshop or site visit enables the development of practical skills through demonstration and guided practice. Simulated learning environments and practice-based scenarios are also used to develop awareness of the professional environment in respect of different vocational scenarios; this encourages experimentation and the trialling of ideas, through problem-based learning.

The opportunity for work placements also enriches and adds value to the learning experience in ways that cannot be captured in simple metrics of scheduled study time.

Opportunities for one-to-one interaction with members of staff<sup>13</sup> also contribute to the overall learning experience by offering individual help or personalised feedback on progress. These may not always be apparent as formal, scheduled sessions. 'Office hours', for example, are a frequent feature, where members of staff are available for one-to-one sessions during set times. Interaction via email is another example of one-to-one contact time. It is important that students are able to recognise these as opportunities for interaction with staff.

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<sup>13</sup> From this point forwards in the document In this section, 'staff' should be taken to mean a lecturer, researcher, technician, member of support staff or graduate teaching assistant of the institution, or a visiting or external specialist.



Given these variations in the form that contact time takes and the functions it serves, it would be challenging and perhaps undesirable to attempt to issue a universal definition. Instead, providers are encouraged to describe the contact with staff that a student can expect in the context of overall learning and teaching activities. In describing contact time, institutions may wish to refer to the dimensions outlined above, namely:

- the form that contact takes, including teaching group size
- the intended purpose of the contact time
- whom the contact is with
- whether or not the contact time is formally scheduled
- the range of activity types provided, in addition to teaching.

## **Explaining notional learning time and academic credit**

The term 'notional learning time' is used to denote all time expected to be spent by a student in pursuit of a higher education qualification. This includes independent study and reading, preparation for contact hours, coursework, revision and summative assessment. This term is used because the actual time that learners need to achieve designated learning outcomes varies considerably. Notional study time of ten hours per credit is the agreed tariff that higher education providers use in designing their programmes and learning outcomes for higher education qualifications, with 360 credits making up an honours degree. This 1:10 tariff is in accordance with the *Higher education credit framework for England* published by QAA in 2001<sup>14</sup> and used in the four nations of the UK. The 1:10 tariff is also used by other countries that operate credit frameworks (examples being Ireland, South Africa and New Zealand).

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<sup>14</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/higher-education-credit-framework-for-england-guidance-on-academic-credit-arrangements-in-higher-education-in-england-augu.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/higher-education-credit-framework-for-england-guidance-on-academic-credit-arrangements-in-higher-education-in-england-augu.aspx)

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## Appendix 1: Indicative list of learning and teaching methods

The list is presented as indicative to reflect that approaches to learning and teaching vary according to the subject, mode of delivery and institution, and can change over time. Methods are described in terms of how they are used to present course-level information rather than being evaluated from a pedagogical perspective.

### Lecture

#### **A presentation or talk on a particular topic**

The term 'lecture' covers everything from the traditional model, where a single member of the institution's staff or an affiliate<sup>15</sup> introduces ideas or delivers facts to a group of students, to approaches that might be much more interactive, involve a variety of contributors, make use of a range of media and technologies, and take place virtually as well as in person. Lectures are assumed, in general, to involve larger groups of students than seminars and tutorials, but size will vary depending upon the nature of what is being taught, the size of the overall student cohort, and practical concerns.

### Seminar

#### **A discussion or classroom session that focuses on a particular topic or project**

Seminars are defined as sessions that provide the opportunity for students to engage in discussion of a particular topic and/or to explore it in more detail than might be covered in a lecture - the extent of interaction will depend on the delivery method. A typical model would involve a guided, tutor-led discussion in a small group. However, the term also encompasses student or peer-led classes with a staff member or affiliate present. Seminars are assumed in general to involve smaller groups of students than lectures, but size will vary depending upon the nature of what is being taught, the size of the overall student cohort, and practical concerns.

### Webinar

#### **A virtual lecture or seminar**

The term 'webinar' refers to both a virtual lecture and an online seminar, made available through technology-enabled learning (TEL). Participation is regarded as guided independent study.

### Tutorial

#### **A meeting that involves one-to-one or small group supervision, feedback or detailed discussion on a particular topic or project**

Tutorials may be distinguished from seminars for the stronger emphasis they place on the role of the tutor in giving direction or feedback. Tutorials can be used to provide one-to-one feedback in respect of assessed work and can happen virtually as well as face-to-face.

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<sup>15</sup> A lecturer, researcher, technician, member of support staff or graduate teaching assistant of the institution or a visiting or external specialist.

## **Project supervision**

### **A meeting with a supervisor to discuss a particular piece of work**

The term 'project supervision' is used to refer to the meetings that a student or group of students would have with a supervisor to plan, discuss and monitor progress on a particular piece of work, such as a dissertation or extended project. Meetings can take place virtually or in person. The size of a project supervision meeting will depend upon the number of students involved in the work concerned and the nature of that work, but supervisions will frequently also take place on a one-to-one basis.

## **Demonstration**

### **A session in which a practical technique or skill is demonstrated**

Examples might include the demonstration of laboratory skills, clinical skills, performance art or fieldwork techniques. Demonstrations can take place in person or virtually. The size of a demonstration is likely to depend upon the number of students involved in the work concerned, as well as the nature of that work, but could also take place on a one-to-one basis.

## **Practical class or workshop**

### **A session involving the acquisition, through practical application, of a particular skill or technique**

Examples are wide ranging and could include a laboratory class, recital, artefact handling/identification, language conversation, sports match, and so on. Practical classes and workshops might incorporate elements of teaching or guided learning, and they are at least likely to be supervised or observed. These sessions are more likely to take place in person but, depending on the nature of the subject, may also be conducted remotely. The size of a practical class or workshop will depend upon the nature of the activity. Workshops are likely to involve at least a small group of students but practical classes could take place on a one-to-one basis.

## **Supervised time in studio/workshop**

### **Time in which students work independently but under supervision, in a specialist facility such as a studio or workshop**

Examples might include time spent in an art or design studio, or in a rehearsal space such as a workshop theatre. It could be timetabled or take place on an ad hoc basis. This type of learning frequently involves interaction with peers as well as staff. Due to the nature of the activity, it is unlikely to take place virtually.

## **Fieldwork**

### **Practical work conducted at an external site**

Examples of fieldwork might include survey work and other forms of data collection, excavations and explorations. The work might be unsupervised or supervised, and supervision could be provided by staff or appointed representatives. Fieldwork might occur in groups of various sizes, or by individuals, depending on the nature of the work involved.

## **External visit**

**A visit to a location away from the usual learning spaces, to experience a particular environment, event, or exhibition relevant to the course of study**

Examples are wide ranging and could include a visit to a business or industrial site, built environment site, museum or collection, or attendance at a performance or exhibition. These visits might be unsupervised or supervised, and supervisors could include staff or appointed representatives. Site visits may be carried out in groups of varying sizes, or by individuals, depending on the nature of the visit and the location.

## **Work-based and placement learning**

**Learning that takes place in the workplace**

A key example of work-based learning would be a managed placement in an organisation or business. The term covers any learning that takes place through an organised work opportunity, rather than in a university or college setting. Some supervision or monitoring is likely to be involved, and may be carried out either by a member of staff or a mentor within the host organisation. Due to the nature of the activity, work-based learning is unlikely to take place virtually. Students might undertake work-based learning individually or in groups, depending on the nature of the workplace and the learning involved.

## Appendix 2: Indicative list of assessment methods

The list is presented as indicative to reflect that approaches to assessment vary according to the subject, mode of delivery and institution, and can change over time. Methods are described in terms of how they are used to assess course-level information rather than being evaluated from a pedagogical perspective.

### Written examination

#### **A question or set of questions relating to a particular area of study**

Written examinations usually occur at the end of a period of learning and assess whether students have achieved the intended learning outcomes. They may be 'seen' (where students are aware in advance of the question(s) they are expected to answer), or 'unseen' (where the questions are only revealed in the examination itself). In an 'open-book' examination, a student is allowed to use a selection of reference materials. A written examination may require a range of different responses, including writing essays, writing short answers, solving problems or use of multiple-choice. Written examinations usually (but not always) take place under timed conditions.

### Written assignment, including essay

#### **An exercise completed in writing in the student's own time**

A written exercise that typically has a deadline attached but which is not carried out under timed conditions. A well known example is the essay, where students are required to write about a particular topic or answer a question in depth. Other examples include written briefings on particular topics.

### Report

#### **A description, summary or other account of an experience or activity**

There are many different kinds of report: often students are required to produce a report after participating in a practical activity such as fieldwork, laboratory work, work experience or a placement. Reports typically have a prescribed format and can serve as the culmination of a project.

### Dissertation

#### **An extended piece of written work, usually for purposes of summative assessment**

A dissertation is a substantial piece of writing deriving from research that a student has undertaken. Dissertations are the result of a student's independent work, carried out under the guidance of a supervisor. Subject areas may follow different conventions in relation to the production of dissertations. (Note that other outputs from projects are listed separately.)

### Portfolio

#### **A compilation of coursework produced in response to specific assessment briefs**

Portfolios of work are a usual component of art and design programmes, and frequently feature as an assessment method in competence-based qualifications. Typically, a portfolio contains a number of pieces of work, usually connected by a topic or theme. Students are usually required to organise their work and perhaps supplement it with reflective accounts in the form of diaries or logs.

## **Project outputs**

### **The products of project work, often of a practical nature (excluding report/dissertation)**

Students may be assessed on the output of a period of project work (see also **Report** and **Dissertation**). Examples are diverse and include the staging of a play or other performance, a piece of artwork, a new product or a poster.

## **Oral assessment/presentation**

### **A conversation or oral presentation on a given topic**

Examples of oral assessments and presentations might include conversations, discussions, debates, presentations and individual contributions to seminars. This category would also include the viva voce exam, which is typically used by institutions in specific circumstances, such as to clarify assessment decisions or to test the thesis of a doctoral candidate.

## **Practical skills assessment**

### **Assessment of a student's practical skills or competence**

Practical skills assessment focuses on whether, and/or how well, a student performs a specific practical skill or technique (or competency). Examples include clinical skills, laboratory techniques, identification of or commentary on artwork, surveying skills, language translation or listening comprehension.

In the performing arts context, a performance can be used to assess the practical skills of individual students (or groups of students). It usually takes place as a 'one-off' live performance viewed by an examiner, though sometimes the examiner may review a recorded performance.

## **Group critique**

### **A method of receiving feedback from both tutors and peers**

In the visual arts, the group critique is an established method of receiving either formative or summative feedback from both tutors and peers.

## **Set exercises**

### **Questions or tasks designed to assess the application of knowledge or of analytical, problem-solving or evaluative skills**

Examples might include data interpretation and data analysis exercises, and problem-based or problem-solving exercises.

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