Union Theological College

Assessment Policy

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1. Introduction: The Purpose of Assessment

1.1. At Union Theological College assessment is an integrated and integral part of learning and teaching. It is the principal instrument by which we:

(i) recognise, reward and monitor levels of achievement;
(ii) identify areas for development in both teaching and student learning;
(iii) maintain academic standards; and
(iv) help to prepare students for life beyond the College, particularly in Christian ministry.

1.2. This policy document provides the principles and expectations that define and safeguard the management of assessment according to QAA expectations. It is intended to be explicit, transparent and accessible to all relevant audiences.

1.3. The principles in this policy have been formulated in accordance with the following documents:
(i) The UK Quality Code for Higher Education:
(ii) QAA Advice and Guidance: Assessment (2018);
(iii) the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications; and
(iv) the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement: Theology and Religious Studies (2022).

1.4. There are many different forms of assessment, serving a variety of purposes. These include:
(i) promoting student learning by providing the student with appropriate feedback;
(ii) evaluating student knowledge, understanding, abilities, skills or competencies;
(iii) providing a mark or grade that enables a student's performance to be established, and may also be used to make progress decisions; and
(iv) enabling the public (including employers) and higher education providers, to know that an individual has attained an appropriate level of achievement that reflects the academic standards set by the awarding institution and agreed UK norms, including the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications. This may include meeting the requirements of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland's Council for Training in Ministry.

1.5. In addition, as a higher education institution with responsibility for the academic standards of awards made in its name, the College is required to have effective procedures for:
(i) designing, approving, monitoring and reviewing the assessment strategies for programmes and awards;
(ii) implementing rigorous assessment policies and practices that ensure the standard for each award and award element is set and maintained at the appropriate level, and that student performance is properly judged against this; and
(iii) evaluating how academic standards are maintained through assessment practice, which also serves to encourage effective learning.

2. General Principles of Assessment

2.1. These principles draw on published guidance on best practice in assessment in higher education and reflect the Guiding Principles of the UK Quality Code Advice and Guidance for Assessment (2018).

(i) Assessment methods and criteria are aligned to learning outcomes and teaching activities

Assessment tasks will be aligned with and will measure student attainment of the intended learning outcomes in an effective way. All programmes and modules have documents which provide learning outcomes and assessment methods and weightings – these are available to all students via the VLE.

(i) Assessment is reliable, consistent, fair and valid

In order for assessment to be accurate and repeatable there will be clear and consistent processes for the setting, marking, grading and moderation of assignments. A variety of assessment tasks will be used so that the whole range of learning outcomes may be appropriately assessed.

(ii) Assessment design is approached holistically

Requirements in terms of programme and module design are communicated and guided by the Programme Design and Programme and Module Review Policy. The approval of the assessment package for any module includes scrutiny of assessment elements and how they contribute to the assessment of programme level learning outcomes. The College also has policies dealing with the Recognition of Prior Learning.

(iii) Assessment is inclusive and equitable

The College will endeavour to ensure that all assigned tasks do not disadvantage any group or individual, e.g. students with disabilities. This is to ensure that all students are provided with an equal opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the learning outcomes – this includes, where necessary, reasonable adjustments. The role of the external examiner, as laid out in the Externality Policy, is one of the processes by which the College maintains oversight of the assessment process to ensure that students have an equal opportunity to demonstrate their achievement.

(iv) Assessment is explicit and transparent

Assessment tasks will be clear and will be communicated to students, staff and external examiners in a timely manner. All programme and module documents provide a statement of how students will be assessed. Assessment is accompanied by marking criteria and, where relevant, a conceptual equivalent marking scale.

(v) Assessment and feedback is purposeful and supports the learning process

Students will receive feedback on all assessment tasks (both formative and summative) in a timely manner. Feedback on assessed work is an important mechanism for enhancing students' ability to interpret assessment criteria and to gain further awareness of assessment

standards. Normal practice is for assessed work to be returned within a three-week period in order that the feedback may have a formative function for subsequent assessment.

(vi) Assessment is timely

All programmes and modules are required to provide a statement of how and when students will be assessed. This is made available to students via the VLE in programme handbooks and module outlines. Where students require reassessment, sufficient time for further learning is available before resit/resubmission dates.

(vii) Assessment is efficient and manageable

Assessment will be used as a tool for learning and engagement. Assessment should be aligned with intended learning outcomes in order to make assessment efficient. Assessment should not overload either staff or students and the scheduling of summative assessment will ensure that students have sufficient time to develop the intended learning outcomes.

(viii) Students are supported and prepared for assessment

Beginning with the initial induction, the nature and basis of assessment is communicated to students in order to promote assessment literacy. There will be an appropriate mix of formative and summative assessment within each module. Feedback is an integral part of the way in which students are given appropriate support to develop the competencies required to meet the learning outcomes.

(ix) Assessment encourages academic integrity

The College promotes academic integrity in the area of assessment through the following means: prior guidance which highlights the importance of academic integrity and informs students of the consequences of academic offences; modelling best practice in lectures and tutorials; designing assessment tasks in such a way as to minimise the opportunities for plagiarism, self-plagiarism and contract cheating; and utilising Turnitin plagiarism detection software.

2.2. Programme teams are encouraged to self-evaluate the effectiveness of assessment strategies at programme level and to align with identified best practice in the sector. The NUS Assessment and Feedback Benchmarking Tool which is provided as an appendix will assist programme teams in the process of self-evaluation.

3. Quality Assurance and Enhancement

3.1. Definition of Assessment

3.1.1. A programme must include both formative and summative assessments:

(i) Formative assessment provides students with opportunities to develop their knowledge and understanding of assessment so that they understand how to improve the quality of work. It may or may not include a mark and for purely formative assessment the mark does not contribute to the final module grade.

(ii) Summative assessment is the formal assessment of how students demonstrate that they have fulfilled the outcomes of the programme of study and that they have achieved the standard required for progression towards an award.
(iii) While some assessment may be entirely formative (for instance, classroom or seminar activities) summative assessment often includes a formative element.

3.2. Assessment Strategies

3.2.1. In order for the College's assessment to be consistent with the national standard of awards it should be carried out by competent and impartial examiners with the involvement of external examiners (see the College's Externality Policy).

3.2.2. The College's processes for staff recruitment and development ensure that everyone involved in student assessment is competent to undertake their roles and fulfil their responsibilities.

3.2.3. Assessment is designed in a 'top down' manner i.e., design begins with the programme and then goes down into modules.

3.2.4. Assessment should be designed in such a way that, where appropriate, it meets the requirements of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland's Council for Training in Ministry.

3.2.5. Assessments will be marked according to published marking criteria. Details of how degree classifications are calculated will be transparent and can be found in the PTFI Postgraduate Taught Study Regulations and in the Study Regulations for Undergraduate Students.

3.2.6. Each module will provide formative feedback (oral, written, or electronic) to individuals or a group of students.

3.3. Assessment Tasks and Learning Outcomes

3.3.1. All assessment elements will be aligned with the relevant learning outcomes.

3.3.2. All specified programme learning outcomes will be appropriately tested through the summative assessments of the programme's modules.

3.3.3. Modular assessment tasks will be designed to test the achievement of all the specified module learning outcomes.

3.3.4. The award of any credit and or degree is based on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes as demonstrated through summative assessment.

3.4. Verification of Assessment

3.4.1. The Faculty should ensure that there is consistency across departments in the form of assessed work (e.g. length, complexity and volume) and the components of the assessment (intended learning outcomes should be assessed through the minimum of discrete tasks).

3.4.2. Departments are responsible for the internal scrutiny of all proposed assessment tasks prior to submission to external examiners for comment and approval.

3.4.3. Module review provides a significant opportunity to review how effective assessment has been in measuring course learning outcomes.

3.5. Communication to Students

3.5.1. The module documents should include details of all approved assessment, the marking criteria, the method of submission and the date of submission or other assessment arrangements. This will be available on the VLE for all students.

3.5.2. Faculty and students engage in a dialogue designed to promote a shared understanding of the nature and basis of assessment. This begins in the orientation process and continues through a student's programme, particularly through use of feedback. The aim is to develop assessment literacy i.e., to help students to develop the ability to understand the process of assessment and to help students develop the confidence and ability to evaluate, and improve on, their own performance.

3.5.3. Whilst the College will ensure that all assessment information is available, it is a student's responsibility to make themselves aware of all assessment details.

3.6. Word Count

3.6.1. A minimum and/or maximum word count may be specified as part of the assessment criteria for a component or module. The word count must specify whether footnotes, bibliographies, and appendices etc. are to be included. Where a word count is included, the module information for students must provide clear details of any penalties that will apply.

3.7. Academic Integrity

3.7.1. Students must maintain the highest standards of academic integrity whilst studying at the College. All work submitted for assessment must be the student's own, unless authorisation has been given for collaboration, and all work must be appropriately cited and referenced.

3.7.2. The College operates effective processes for promoting academic integrity and identifying, investigating and responding to unacceptable academic practice by practical measures such as:

(i) minimising the availability of opportunities for plagiarism, self-plagiarism and contract cheating by utilising a variety of assessment methods and by regularly refreshing assessment topics;
(ii) actively highlighting matters of academic integrity, modelling best practice in lectures and tutorials, and making students aware of the consequences of academic offences;
(iii) utilising plagiarism detection software; and
(iv) investigating, and where necessary, penalising unacceptable academic practice relating to assessment.

3.7.3. All written assignments submitted via the VLE will be subject to scrutiny by the cloud-based plagiarism detection application Turnitin.

3.7.4. All work is marked anonymously unless there are sound educational reasons for not doing so, or the type of assessment makes anonymous marking impractical e.g. an oral test or an essay in which discussion with the tutor on the topic identifies the student.

3.7.5. The College will investigate and, where necessary, penalise any conduct which is likely to give an unfair advantage to the candidate, affect the security of assessment, and/or affect the standards of the degrees awarded by College including, *inter alia* plagiarism, self-plagiarism, impersonation, collusion, falsification, exam misconduct, or contract cheating. Details of the processes for postgraduate students are laid out in the Academic Misconduct Procedures, an appendix to the Academic Integrity Policy. The processes for undergraduate students are laid out in the Academic Integrity Procedures (UG).

3.8. Reasonable Adjustments

3.8.1. The College will make reasonable adjustments to assessment to support students with a disability (including a specific Learning Disability) or other long-term health condition. The aim of reasonable adjustment is to ensure that all students are provided with the opportunity to demonstrate the full extent of their academic abilities, irrespective of a disability or long-term condition.

3.8.2. Students should notify the College of any such condition at the time of enrolment or as soon as possible thereafter so that appropriate support measures may put in place.

3.8.3. Alternative assessment is one way to ensure that assessment tasks are sufficiently inclusive and give all students fair opportunities to demonstrate the course learning outcomes.

3.9. Exceptional Circumstances

3.9.1. Students must notify the College of any circumstances which are sudden, unexpected, significantly disruptive, and beyond the student's control and which may affect their performance at assessment, such as a serious illness or the death of a close relative. The College

will ensure that appropriate arrangements are put in place for such students, such as an extension or deferral of assessment to a later date.

3.10. Submission of Written Assessment Elements

3.10.1. Students are expected to submit all written elements by the published deadline. Module documents will explain any penalties that may be incurred for late submission. A student who is unable to submit coursework without good cause may be deemed by the Exam Board to have failed the assessment concerned.

3.11. Attendance at Scheduled Assessments

3.11.1. Students are expected to attend all scheduled assessments e.g. presentations, workshops or class tests. A student who is unable to attend a scheduled assessment without good cause may be deemed by the Exam Board to have failed the assessment concerned.

3.12. Examinations

3.12.1. It is the responsibility of candidates to attend at the prescribed place and time. A student absent without good cause from an examination will be deemed by the Exam Board to have failed the examination.

3.13. Resit and Re-submission

3.13.1. When a student does not meet the progression and award requirements at the first attempt, they may be permitted to undertake a resit or should be reassessed in the failed module(s).

3.13.2. Resitting Assessment

3.13.2.1. Where resitting is required and permitted a student will be provided with timely academic feedback and guidance prior to re-assessment. They may be offered, but are not automatically entitled to, additional tutoring and supervision. There is no fee for a resit.

3.13.2.2. Resitting should be by the same method of assessment. Where such a method is difficult or impossible (e.g. a group project) then the Board of Examiners may set a different assessment that allows the student to demonstrate achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

3.13.3. Normally the maximum mark when resitting reassessment is capped at the pass mark. Should a student obtain a lower mark in the second attempt the higher mark will stand.

3.13.4. Repeating Assessment

3.13.4.1. Where a repeat of assessment is required and a student is given a second attempt at assessment in the following academic year. The student must re-enrol in the modules and further fees will be required.

3.13.4.2. Normally the maximum mark when repeating assessment is capped at the pass mark.

3.14. Marking and Grading Criteria

3.14.1. A student's performance will be marked according to clear assessment criteria as set out in the module assessment document. Assessment criteria will:

(i) examine the extent to which the published learning outcomes have been achieved;
(ii) be set at the required standard and level of the module; and
(iii) be of a comparable standard to equivalent awards elsewhere in the UK.

3.14.2. Single blind marking and moderation is required for assignments. All PGT dissertations should be double blind marked and moderated with the markers determining an agreed draft mark.

3.15. Feedback

3.15.1. Students will be provided with feedback which will:

(i) relate to the learning outcomes and marking criteria;
(ii) be clear, constructive and motivating;
(iii) be sufficiently detailed;
(iv) be critical with the intention of enabling student development;
(v) place ownership of learning in the student's hands; and
(vi) be returned within the specified timeframe (usually within three weeks following the deadline for submission).

3.15.2. Formative feedback is often delivered in the classroom or in seminar activities. Students may also receive formative feedback through digital learning resources e.g. responsive learning apps like Cerego or in the feedback provided in discussion boards in the VLE.

3.15.3. This feedback may be both individual (relating to a specific student's work) or generic, referring to issues arising from the work produced by a cohort of students (this is particularly useful with exam feedback).

3.15.4. Formative feedback at an early stage in a module can help to identify those students who may need additional support.

3.15.5. Feedback should, wherever possible, be tailored so that it may be used by the students in future assignments. Feedback will be provided to students within 3 weeks of the deadline for submission.

3.15.6. At the start of each programme, and then periodically thereafter, students should be reminded about the importance of feedback to their learning. As part of the annual monitoring process, the views of students on the methods, content and timing of feedback are gathered.

3.15.7. Module review will consider if the feedback offered to students was timely, constructive and developmental.

3.16. Moderation

3.16.1. The College understands moderation to be a particular form of second marking based on a representative sample of student work to verify the consistent application of assessment criteria and marking schemes.

3.16.2. Moderation is required for all components of summative assessment, irrespective of the level of the work or the credit weighting of the assessments.

3.16.3. The Head of Department has overall responsibility for overseeing the planning and implementation of appropriate internal moderation processes on a programme or module. The grades generated by the first marker(s) are scrutinised to verify the consistent application of assessment criteria and marking schemes. This process of second marking may involve the sampling of work across the range of marks. In this case the sample must include the following:

(i) all fails;
(ii) examples from all bands; and
(iii) several of the highest marks.

3.16.4. If the second markers agree with the marks for the sampled students, it can be assumed that marking is accurate for the population. However, if the second markers disagree significantly with one or more marks, the sample must be extended to give confidence in the accuracy of marks for all students in the assessment. Any amendment to the marks of the sample must be applied to the rest of the cohort in order to ensure equity and consistency.

3.16.5. The process of internal moderations should also ensure the consistency of marking across all modules within the department.

3.16.6. Examples of moderated assessment will be provided, via the External Examiner SharePoint site, to the external examiner for consideration prior to the meeting of the Board. This should be accompanied by a completed Module Moderator Report to EE document. External examiners shall be informed of the identity of all internal markers and moderators for each module.

3.17. Board of Examiners

3.17.1. Assessment within all PTFI programmes is conducted under the supervision and control of the Board of Examiners. The Externality Policy, together with PGT Regulations outline the role of the Board of Examiners.

3.17.1.1. The Internal Board of Examiners ensure assessment procedures have been carried out in a proper and impartial manner and in accordance with the approved policies. The Internal Board of Examiners reports to the Board of Examiners.

3.17.2. The Programme Board of Examiners for the BA Hons Theology will be chaired by the Partnership Liaison Manager from St Mary's University Twickenham and will report to the St Mary's University Undergraduate Examinations Board which will confirm marks and awards. The UG Study Regulations outline the role of the Board of Examiners.

3.18. Assessment Review

3.18.1. The programme and module review policy and processes will consider how the assessment may continue to be developed and enhanced.

Assessment and feedback benchmarking tool

national union of students

This benchmarking tool is the latest in a series of resources NUS has produced to help you to improve the quality of feedback and assessment at your institution. You can use it in conjunction with the Feedback and Assessment Campaign Toolkit and other resources available on NUS Connect.

The tool is based on ten principles of effective feedback. In 2010, as part of the Student Feedback Project, NUS produced a Charter on Feedback and Assessment. This benchmarking tool is based on the principles of this charter, but the principles have been updated to reflect the priorities and needs of a new cohort of students.

How to use the tool

You can use the tool at a course, departmental, faculty or whole institution level. Read each of the principles, and decide which of the boxes best describes where you think your institution is. Once you've mapped out your current level, you may wish to choose a couple of priority areas to work towards achieving the next level. The tool is a good starting point for discussions between staff and students about how you can work together to improve feedback and assessment.

You could also share practice with other willing unions, perhaps on a regional basis or by mission group. You can learn from unions that place their institutions higher than yours: what good practice could you borrow and adapt? If they've recently made changes, what were the challenges they faced?

Things to bear in mind

- Each of the "outstanding" practices involve staff and students working in partnership. This partnership needs to be meaningful in order to work, which means that both groups must listen and be willing to compromise. Some of the principles may be mutually incompatible in some institutions: for example, it may not be possible to achieve "outstanding" in both feedback timeliness and feedback quality if the institution cannot afford more staff time for marking. Have honest conversations with institutional staff about what is and isn't possible.
- You may not be able to achieve "outstanding" in everything at once. Decide where best to target your resources: do you want to work hard to get one particular area to "outstanding", or do you want to spend that time getting three or four areas up one level from their current position? Are there specific departments you want to work with, or is a central minimum standard what is required?
- It is also worth bearing in mind that many of the people who mark coursework and exams are postgraduate students: you may wish to discuss the benchmarking tool with your postgraduate reps to make sure that your campaign is inclusive of all your members. This may mean ensuring that any additional work is incorporated into markers' work plans, or campaigning for better pay and conditions for graduate teaching assistants alongside your feedback campaign.
- Your union may disagree with some of the levels in the benchmarking tool – and that's OK! The tool was created collaboratively by student officers, based on principles put together from research into what students value from feedback. This doesn't mean it will work at every institution. Feel free to tweak it or build on it to make it more relevant to the context of your institution. You could use it to start a conversation with institutional staff – what can you take from the tool and use to enhance the quality of feedback and assessment at your institution?

If you have any questions, please contact: **nss@nus.org.uk**

10 Principles of Effective Feedback and Assessment

1 Diverse forms of assessment at a variety of appropriate times

There should be a range of assessment mechanisms that are linked to learning outcomes and test competencies that graduates will need. Students should be involved in designing or choosing these assessment mechanisms.

2 Assessment criteria

Assessment criteria should be clear, linked to learning outcomes and easily accessible to students. Students should be supported to understand them and to understand what constitutes academic misconduct.

3 Submission processes

Submission processes should be simple for the student and electronic where possible. Processes should be appropriate to the assessment and accessible to all students.

4 Workload distribution

Students should have their workload fairly distributed throughout the year, rather than clustering deadlines together.

5 Anonymity and externality

Approaches to anonymity should be decided in partnership between staff and students, with the assumption that, unless decided otherwise, all summative assessments should be anonymous (as far as is possible). Appropriate external input is sought during assessment to ensure fairness and comparability.

6 Marking consistency and distribution

Marks should be consistent across programmes, and the full range of marks should be used across the institution.

7 Feedback timeliness

Feedback should be given in time for students to act on it in their next piece of work.

8 Feedback quality

Feedback should be constructive, helpful and detailed, to enable a student to understand why they received the mark they got and what to do to improve for next time.

9 Formative assessment and feedback

There should be opportunities for feedback on work that doesn't contribute to the overall degree mark, in order to facilitate learning.

10 Self-reflection and peer learning

Opportunities for peer learning and self-reflective exercises should be embedded in the curriculum.