UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Assessment Ordinance:

Good Practice Guidance

Executive Summary

This guidance has been written to accompany the new Ordinance for Assessment Formats and to support colleagues at the point of assessment design. It provides information on how to develop assessments that create a more coherent and supported student assessment experience. While primarily written for those responsible for designing assessments, it can also serve as a resource for others involved in the assessment process or anyone interested in good assessment design practices.

The guide is organised to first provide an overview of good assessment design principles. This section explores: programme-level assessment strategy; aligning assessment with teaching activities and learning outcomes; the important role of formative assessment; support for supervisors; communication of assessment expectations and marking criteria; and reducing barriers through inclusive assessment design. The document then offers specific guidance on the five assessment formats in the Ordinance to support colleagues with considerations and recommendations relevant to each format. Additionally, the guidance includes case studies from assessment practices at Cambridge, which are discussed both in relation to the overarching principles of good practice in the initial overview section and as aligned with the individual assessment formats they illustrate.

Overall, this guidance aims to support educators in creating assessment strategies that are coherent, valid, and inclusive, ensuring assessments are meaningful and supportive of student learning. For more information on the expectations for each of the five assessment formats, please see the Ordinance for Assessment Formats on the Education Quality & Policy Office website.

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Introduction

Assessment plays a central role in shaping students' experiences at university, influencing how they engage with and perceive their education. It offers students the opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge, skills and understanding they have developed throughout their studies. This guidance provides an overview of key considerations for designing assessments, particularly with a mind towards a holistic programme-level strategy. It also explores the relationship between formative and summative assessments and how best to support students through these. The guide thereafter offers specific advice on the five assessment formats contained within the Ordinance, which aims to enable students to effectively demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understanding. This final section of the guide also includes a curated selection of case studies that explore the assessment formats, their implementation at Cambridge, and the range of support available to both students and staff.

Good Practice in Assessment

How assessment design influences student learning and skill development

Assessment is one of the most influential aspects of a student's educational experience, as student strategies for learning and what they choose to prioritise are strongly informed by how they will be assessed. Key factors influencing students' experiences of assessment are the format (type, e.g. exam or presentation), method (conditions, e.g. open-book), weighting, sequencing and frequency. Students will use specific learning strategies based on these factors, so these design features are crucial in shaping their education by encouraging them to learn and develop the skills required for the chosen assessment format. Careful selection of assessment formats ensures that the programme tests the target skills required by the programme (the validity of the assessment method), and provide the best opportunities for students to showcase their learning.

By offering a variety of assessments, programmes can provide more opportunities for students to evidence and articulate their understanding, while also helping them develop the diverse range of skills needed to undertake different types of assessments. This skills development is also usefully thought of in relation to designing authentic assessments. Authentic assessments enable students to demonstrate the knowledge, skills and understanding that they have developed in ways that are meaningful for the discipline. Authentic assessments are sometimes, in addition, conceptualised as assessments which mimic how knowledge is employed and applied in the professional world.

The case study from the History of Art Tripos provides an overview of their approach to authentic assessments. The portfolio coursework assessment enables students to demonstrate their knowledge of the discipline and the skills required for the assessment task, while being framed within the disciplinary and professional context of museums and galleries.

In the Department of Engineering, students complete a major project in their fourth year which mirrors the approach one could expect to in the engineering profession. The project allows students to work in an area of their choice where they can use everything they have learnt as an Engineer to address such 'complex problems'. They are assessed via a final report, two presentations and an interim report, all of which mirror expectations on communication within the profession. They are also supported through formative activities and timely feedback.

Developing a programme-level assessment strategy to support student learning

Good assessment practice is not just about the specific ways an individual task is designed or delivered, but about how the whole set of assessments for a programme fit together to shape student learning. Thinking about a programme-level assessment strategy also considers how the range of assessments inform and are informed by the programme material and aims, and how the assessment strategy is communicated to both staff and students.

A programme-level assessment strategy will aid these more holistic reflections on assessment design. These should include considerations of quantity, pacing and overall assessment 'diet' (the format and method of assessment), with a view to ensuring the assessment strategy supports student learning experiences and offers opportunities for students to both demonstrate and develop the understanding and skills required by the learning outcomes of the programme. Learning outcomes should reflect the level of study, as outlined in the Sector Recognised Standards defined by the Office for Students. An effective way to facilitate this discussion is to begin by considering the learning outcomes for the programme, critically reflect on what students must be able to demonstrate by the end of their studies, and then design both assessments and learning activities accordingly.

Connecting assessment with teaching activities and learning outcomes

Approaching assessment design through considering its connection with both learning outcomes as well as teaching and learning activities invites a more critically reflective approach: one that considers which assessment formats could enable students to demonstrate the understanding and capabilities

required at the level of the programme, and how they can be supported through the teaching and learning activities to get there. Figure 1 below illustrates the ideal connection between the teaching, learning and assessment experience for students in what is commonly known as constructive alignment in curriculum and assessment design.

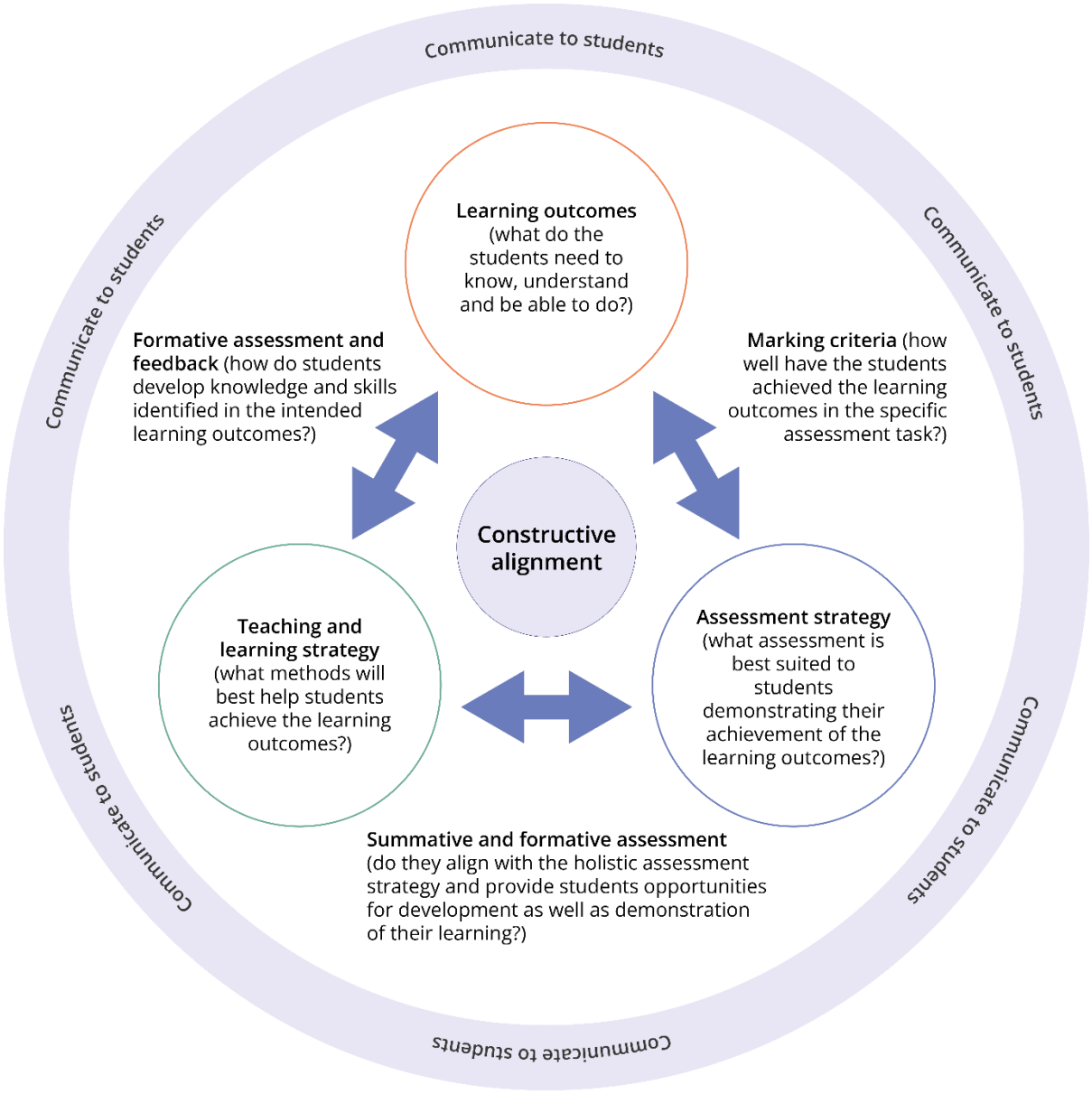

Figure 1. Constructive alignment of teaching, learning and assessment

The role of formative and summative assessment and feedback in supporting learning

Timely feedback on students' performance in assessment also plays a vital developmental role in shaping their ongoing progress and approaches to

learning. Assessment - both formative and summative - should therefore be understood as being both an *evaluation* of the knowledge, skills and understanding students develop through their studies (assessment of learning), and also as a *developmental process* through which students build the skills required to understand and reflect on their own learning process, which will equip them better to undertake a particular format of assessment (assessment for learning).

Formative assessments (which do not contribute directly to students' degree classification) and the summative assessments (which contribute directly to degree classification) need to be in conversation with each other. Figure 2 below highlights the roles of both and the relationship between them.

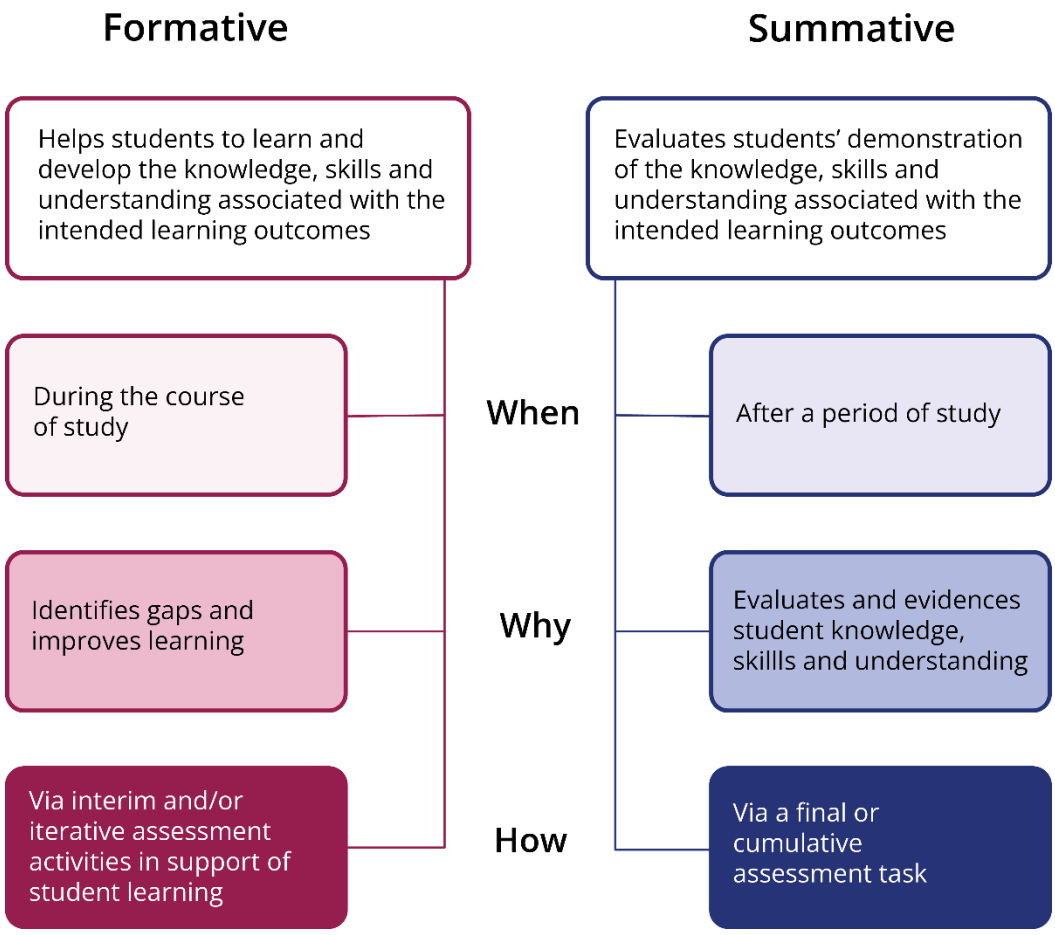

Figure 2. Comparing formative and summative assessments

Formative assessment opportunities, including supervision work, serve to help both students and staff identify areas where the student needs further development. They provide actionable feedback to guide future work and also inform teaching practices, enabling the use of tailored learning tools and

methods to support the student's understanding and skill-building. Formative opportunities provide students with a low-stakes environment to practise the required skills for the assessment and develop their knowledge and understanding based on the formative review of their performance.

In order to make the most of formative assessment opportunities, careful planning is therefore needed to ensure that they offer timely opportunities for feedback, fit in with the wider teaching and assessment experience, and are joined up with the guidance and communications for summative assessment. When providing feedback consider approaches such as written notes, verbal (via Moodle audio recordings or screencasts), and in-person conversation. Verbal feedback, for example, can be particularly useful for students with reading difficulties.

The case study from the Psychological and Behavioural Sciences Tripos explores how students are supported in their presentation assessment through formative opportunities to practise giving presentations and receiving feedback.

In Plant & Microbial Sciences, students are exposed to the types of questions asked on the short answer paper examination through informal opportunities to complete past exam papers in scheduled class time (e.g. during enzyme incubation) as an opportunity to receive feedback from the demonstrators.

Supporting supervisors in their role in formative and summative assessments

It is particularly important to consider how to support new formats of summative assessment through the students' formative assessment experiences (whether newly introduced to the programme or just new to a given cohort of students – this includes first-year students undertaking their first written exams in Cambridge, for example). If changes are made to summative assessment, ensure that supervisors are made aware of any changes to assessment format, weighting, and marking criteria, so they can understand how best to support their students. Teaching and work produced by students in the supervisory setting should be connected to these decisions and will need to be adapted as necessary.

A case study from the Modern & Medieval Languages Tripos highlights how their students and staff are being supported with an assessment task that asks them to produce a video. Key to this case study is the support and resources for the supervisors teaching in colleges hosted on a dedicated Moodle page.

In the case study from Plant & Microbial Sciences, the Department's supervisor coordinator collates and curates resources and shares these with supervisors, such as example marked essays, guidance on grading work, synoptic essay advice, and examples from the sessions delivered to students on the themes in the examinations.

More broadly, it is important that all supervisors are able to see the programme's holistic assessment strategy, its purpose, and their contribution to this. Supervisions can provide rich opportunities for more personalised and deeper explorations of the subject; they are particularly effective at supporting students' learning when they are aligned with the aims and assessment of the programme. Expectations should also be set for students to help them understand the role (and limits) of their supervisor in relation to their summative assessments, particularly when it comes to reviewing drafts of work that will be submitted for summative assessment.

The need for supervisors to understand the wider picture and connection between learning, teaching and assessment is equally true for students, who will experience a more coherent and cohesive learning experience when the various aspects of their education and assessment feel connected (see again Figure 1).

Communicating assessment expectations and marking criteria to support student understanding and their self-evaluation

Alongside the programme's assessment strategy there should be clearly and timely communicated expectations for assessments to students. This includes a comprehensive assessment brief laying out full instructions for the task, consistency in language around assessment practices and processes used across the programme, and marking criteria provided in advance of the assessment. Marking criteria should be appropriate to, and adapted where necessary for, the assessment method and level of the programme.

Marking criteria should be discussed early in the course with students to unpack the language and help them understand the expectations of the discipline (which may differ from their previous learning). Where helpful for students to understand the purpose of the assessment, the reasons behind assessment design decisions should also be explained. This conversation could be facilitated through a sample of exemplars which illustrate different approaches to a question, or which illustrate approaches which are weaker and stronger. Students can then be tasked with marking the exemplars using the marking criteria to develop their understanding of how these are applied to evaluate student work. This will develop both student 'assessment literacies' (what is required; at what level; how their work will be judged) and their skill in evaluative judgement: appraising how well they are doing in line with the criteria and expectations. These marking criteria should also be communicated clearly to demonstrators, assessors, markers and staff who develop formative assessment tasks and provide formative feedback, such as supervisors.

In the Geographical Tripos separate marking criteria to those for examinations have been developed for coursework specifically and are discussed with students so that they understand what the examiners are looking for in their assignments.

A case study from the Pharmacology course provides an example of how clear assignment instructions, a range of exemplars, and feedback on draft summative presentations has enabled students to approach this task with more confidence.

The students in Chemical Engineering and Biotechnology are supported in undertaking their assessment through a clear assessment brief which explains the task, expectations, timings, and grading. Tutorials are also provided on creative and prose writing by an academic with expertise in the assessment task. Students also critically engage critically with AI software to understand what these tools can do and where their limitations lie.

Reducing barriers through inclusive assessment design and varied assessment opportunities

Many students encounter barriers in their assessments due to features designed into the assessment format, some of which may be entirely avoidable when considering the specific skills the assessment is intending to evaluate. A critical approach to assessment design can help identify and eliminate these barriers at the point of design, which in turn reduces the need for individual adjustments. For example, an assessment might be intended to evaluate students' ability to understand and analyse a text, but if the text is provided as a scanned copy, as an image or PDF, it may not be possible for a screen reader to recognise the text, or for a student to adjust the contrast for legibility. An individual could then be disadvantaged even though this does not reflect their ability to analyse the text critically. Not all student needs or preferences can be attended to at once, but considering barriers at the assessment design stage can reduce the need for individual adjustments later.

The skills required for each assessment format may enable some students to demonstrate their learning more effectively than other formats and this can affect the relationship students have with the outputs of their efforts. Therefore, employing a variety of assessment opportunities is key to enabling a broader range of students to showcase their understanding to their full potential. This does not mean every single assessment needs to be different in order to provide the broadest possible assessment diet: rather, it is about reflecting on the actual skills which need to be tested across the programme as a whole, so that students have a diversity of formats through which to demonstrate their understanding and develop a variety of skills.

Providing support and flexibility for students with additional needs

Seeking ways to ensure the assessment is as accessible as possible – as discussed above – and anticipating possible adjustments will minimise the need for additional individual adjustments to be made.

An Examination Access Arrangement can be used by a student who requires a reasonable adjustment or amendments as a result of a short-term condition. An Adjusted Mode of Assessment (AMA) is used where reasonable adjustments to the standard mode of assessment do not adequately address the specific, substantial disadvantage experienced by a disabled student, or student with a

temporary substantial injury, in relation to the assessment. In most cases, this will entail determining an adjustment that sits outside the Regulations for examination, and which provides an effective - but reasonable - means of avoiding or offsetting the disadvantage the student would experience. This process is not an appropriate solution where a student is currently incapable of engaging with their studies at all, as a result of their disability or another reason; in this case intermission should be sought.

Supporting students in navigating AI and upholding academic integrity

Clearly communicate to students which software, including artificial intelligence tools, they are - and are not - permitted to use during the assessment, as well as the specific ways they can or cannot use them. This is important as they may be using software in their day-to-day activities and/or assessed work that is not allowed for other assessments. To help students understand the impact of breaches to academic integrity on their learning, provide a rationale for the chosen assessment format, including the skills it aims to develop and why those skills are important. This context will help students understand how using prohibited software undermines their learning and skill development in key areas necessary for their discipline and future professions.

For additional guidance on artificial intelligence, refer to the AI Policy Framework and consider undertaking the Generative AI Literacy Course developed by the Blended Learning Service. Further information for staff about academic misconduct can be found on the Office of Student Conduct, Complaints & Appeals website. For transparency, it may be helpful to inform students that suspicion of academic misconduct will lead to formal investigation and, where a breach is found, academic sanctions.

Format-specific Guidance

In addition to the general guidance on assessment design provided above, this section offers specific guidance on each of the five assessment formats. It includes practical recommendations and considerations to support colleagues in their decision-making. This section is designed for readers who may be consulting just one or two formats rather than reading the entire guide. As such, some guidance is repeated across multiple formats where necessary to ensure each format can stand alone as a useful resource. For full details on the expectations for each of the assessment formats, please see the Ordinance for Assessment Formats on the Education Quality & Policy Office website.

Where appropriate and feasible, aim to include a variety of assessment formats across your programme. This allows students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understanding in diverse ways. Each format should be chosen with a clear rationale, based on the specific skills it is intended to assess. It is important that both the programme team and students understand the purpose of the chosen format, to understand how it is contributing to the development and assessment of the required knowledge, skills and understanding of the discipline.

Coursework

Coordinate deadlines with other assessments

Coursework deadlines should be considered in relation to other assessments students may be facing within the same term. This will help to alleviate unnecessary pressure and enable students to perform to their best for each assessment and manage their workload more effectively. Careful scheduling and, where possible, staggered deadlines across the programme as a whole can reduce stress for both students and staff.

Be aware of the policy on additional time

For undergraduate and certain postgraduate taught programmes, extensions to submission deadlines can be sought through the department's self-certification process, based on the University's self-certification extension policy, or for extensions beyond that permitted by self-certification, an additional application can be made under the process for dissertation or coursework extensions to the

submission deadline. For MPhil by Advanced Study, MSt, MEd, MRes or CPGS students, extension policies are devised at local level, except for an extension to the submission deadline for the thesis/dissertation, which is applied for by the student via CamSIS and is subject to a centralised approvals process.

Utilise interim deadlines to support progress monitoring

Introducing interim deadlines for drafts or sections of the work throughout the coursework timeline helps students manage their workload. While examiners cannot provide feedback on summative work in draft form, this structure encourages timely undertaking of components of larger projects, allowing for a 'chunked' approach to assignment completion.

Provide clear and varied exemplars to clarify expectations

To help students understand the standards and requirements of the assignment, it is beneficial to provide a variety of exemplars. Where appropriate these could cover a range of approaches to the assignment. These examples can help clarify expectations, develop confidence and reduce uncertainty around marking criteria.

Consider digital accessibility

If coursework involves the use of online platforms or digital tools, ensure that these resources are accessible to all students, particularly if they are accessing the platforms outside of Cambridge. This includes compatibility with screen readers, text-to-speech tools, and other assistive technologies. Moreover, consider whether online submission platforms allow for different file types (e.g. Word doc, PDF, video, etc) that can be easily accessed by students with varying needs.

In-person (invigilated) handwritten examinations

Provide clear guidance on examination questions, expectations and procedures

Examination questions should be written in a clear manner and, except where technical terms are required, use plain English. The Accessibility Disability Resource Centre offer support in examination question setting to support inclusive practices. Further, ensure that students are well-informed about the examination procedures, including the exam format, what materials are

permitted, the expected time frame, and how to approach different types of questions. Providing this information in advance – preferably at the very start of a course of study – in an accessible format can reduce unnecessary stress and help students manage expectations.

Provide mock examination opportunities

Providing mock examination opportunities can be particularly helpful if there is a change in the format of the examination, such as changing from an open-book format to a traditional in-person handwritten exam. In any instance, it is highly beneficial to offer practice papers for students to attempt in their own time (perhaps for supervision feedback) or, where possible, provide mock opportunities for the cohort. This allows students to practise under timed conditions and become familiar with the exam structure. It also provides an opportunity for students to gauge their performance and note the areas they still need to develop to aid their exam preparations.

Support academic integrity

Although students will not be using any kind of software for a handwritten exam, it is still valuable to follow the advice above (p.12) on academic integrity when approaching formative activities done in preparation for their exams. Understanding the rationale for the chosen assessment format, including the skills it aims to develop and why those skills are important, will help students to understand how using certain software for preparatory exercises such as supervision work may impact their learning and, in turn, their exam performance and skill development in key areas.

In-person (invigilated) digital examinations

Provide clear guidance on examination questions, expectations and procedures

Examination questions should be written in a clear manner and, except where technical terms are required, use plain English. It may also be beneficial to provide a hard copy of the examination questions and associated information, as this would be helpful for students with working memory issues. The Accessibility Disability Resource Centre offer support in examination question setting to support inclusive practices. Ensure that students are fully informed about the examination procedures, including the exam format, what materials

are permitted, the expected time frame, and how to approach different types of questions. Providing this information in advance - both in writing and, where necessary, in accessible formats - can help students manage expectations and reduce unnecessary stress.

Provide clear instructions on exam technology requirements

Provide clear, concise instructions on how to access the digital exam, how to use the software, and how to submit answers. These instructions should be made available in advance and offered in accessible formats. Make sure that students understand what to do in the event of a technical issue and provide a clear protocol for seeking support if needed during the exam – consult with the Exam Operations team for this advice. Students will also need to be provided with clear instructions on what devices are (and are not) permissible to use for the examination. They will also need clarity on what other software available on those devices are (and are not) allowed to use during the examination. Training on any software required for the examination should be provided to all students, with appropriate opportunities to familiarise themselves with its functionalities and use first-hand.

Provide practice opportunities with the examination software

Schedule time for students to have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the exam software before the actual assessment. Providing a practice exam or sample questions allows students to navigate the system in a low-pressure environment, helping to reduce any potential technical concerns and ensuring they are confident in using the tools available to them during the real exam.

Non-invigilated digital open-book examinations

Provide clear guidance on examination questions, expectations and procedures

Examination questions should be written in a clear manner and, except where technical terms are required, use plain English. The Accessibility Disability Resource Centre offer support in examination question setting to support inclusive practices. Ensure that students are well-informed about the examination procedures, including the exam format, what materials are permitted, the expected time frame, and how to approach different types of questions.

Provide detailed instructions on how students should approach the exam, including the acceptable use of external resources (e.g. textbooks, online materials) and any restrictions on collaboration or internet research. Transparency in the exam's scope and criteria ensures students can prepare and undertake the examination effectively. Providing this information in advance - both in writing and, where necessary, in accessible formats - can help students manage expectations and reduce unnecessary stress.

Provide clear instructions on exam technology requirements

Provide clear, concise instructions on how to access the digital exam, use the software, and submit answers. These instructions should be made available in advance and offered in (possibly multiple) accessible formats (e.g. video with audio, written). Make sure that students understand what to do in the event of a technical issue and provide a clear protocol for seeking support if needed during the exam. Students will also need to be provided with clear instructions on what devices are and are not appropriate to undertake the examination, and what other software available on those devices are and are not allowed to use during the examination.

Provide practice opportunities with the examination software

Ensure students have the chance to familiarise themselves with the exam software tool(s) before the actual assessment. If possible, providing a practice exam or sample questions allows students to navigate the system in a low-pressure environment, helping to reduce any potential technical concerns and ensuring they are confident in using the tools available to them during the real exam.

Be clear and transparent about time management for the examination

Since digital open-book exams are often self-paced, it is important to communicate time management expectations clearly. Provide guidance on how long students should spend on each section or question, and clarify whether there are any restrictions on when the exam must be completed (e.g. within a 3- or 5-hour window). This means students are aware of the time commitment involved and can plan their work effectively.

Presentations

Consider presentation delivery times and methods

Consider allowing students to select a presentation time from a range of options, if this is feasible. This flexibility can help alleviate nerves by allowing students to choose a time when they feel most comfortable. Additionally, consider providing students with the option to present via an online platform, as this can be especially helpful for students who may feel more nervous in face-to-face settings or for those with mobility issues. Finally, if it is possible and is not a core skill required by the programme and/or accreditors, consider whether students need to present to an audience, or whether it is still possible to achieve the learning outcomes for the programme through presenting directly to an academic panel or assessors. If presentation skills are an important aspect to the assessment, be clear with students what the expectations are regarding notes, scripts and presentation aids, such as PowerPoint. This ensures that students are not unfairly penalised for factors unrelated to the subject matter and programme requirements.

Provide opportunities for students to practise and familiarise themselves with the presentation room in advance

To help students to develop confidence in presenting, provide low-stakes, formative opportunities for them to practise their presentations. This can be achieved by gradually increasing the audience size - beginning with peer-to-peer sharing, progressing to small group presentations, and incorporating these activities regularly into the schedule. Additionally, inviting students to record their presentations in their own time and watch them back will also support their reflections of their performance and help them to improve.

Where possible, provide students with the opportunity to visit the presentation room or environment prior to their scheduled presentation. If feasible, provide opportunities for students to run through their slides (to check everything works) and speak in the room to hear how their voice sounds in the acoustics of the space. Familiarity with the space, equipment, and layout can help reduce unnecessary stress and enhance confidence, particularly for students who may experience sensory sensitivities or discomfort in unfamiliar environments.

Consider allowing students to record presentations

If it is possible and is not a core skill required by the programme and/or accreditors, consider whether providing students with the option to record their presentations ahead of time is feasible and appropriate. This can be particularly helpful for students who feel anxious, those with speech impairments, or those who find it difficult to present live. Recorded presentations that are presented live with the student present still allow for a meaningful presentation-based assessment. Where appropriate, students are then still able to be present for any questions following their presentation. Recorded presentations with no "live" element are considered coursework; please see the expectations outlined under the Ordinance for Assessment Formats for more information.

Consider options for supporting students through the presentation Q&A

Students may find it helpful to take a short break between the presentation delivery and the subsequent Q&A session. This break provides the student with an opportunity to gather their thoughts and prepare for any follow-up questions, thus reducing potential pressure and facilitating a more thoughtful and composed response. If a student digresses or misinterprets a question, guide them back to the core focus of the question without discouraging them. This can be done gently to ensure the student stays on track while ensuring fairness and clarity in their responses.

Case Studies

This section presents a range of case studies from the University of Cambridge, offering insight into how different assessment formats are being adapted across diverse disciplinary contexts to support student learning. We aim to continue adding to this section to include a broader range of disciplines and example aligned with all five assessment formats. If you would like to contribute an example from your own context, please get in touch: cctlenq@admin.cam.ac.uk.

Coursework

History of Art: combined portfolio for first-year students

The History of Art Tripos has been assessing students on their core Part I course, *The Objects of Art History*, through a combined portfolio comprising a catalogue entry, an exhibition review, and a proposal for a collection display with rationale and accompanying wall text. These combined elements mirror the types of activities found in professional roles associated with the field and, equally, engage students in discipline-specific forms of content creation and analysis. In this year-long course, students are given a lot of autonomy to explore topics for the portfolio elements that are of particular interest to them.

Alongside the drive to create a more authentic assessment, successful widening participation endeavours have meant that more students now come to read History of Art who have not had previous experience of studying the subject. The assessment modes on this course, therefore, operate as a scaffolded way of developing student understanding of the discipline itself – its ways of thinking and practicing – and as a process through which students hone the skills associated with art history and its potential future professional avenues.

To support students through the assessment, they must a skills workshop (or set of workshops) associated with each element of the portfolio. These sessions introduce the format of each exercise, opening out to broader themes and questions prompted by these forms of writing. For example, utilising a neutral or more personal voice between exercise one and two, how to research using collections, or how to describe the impact of space and atmosphere on the reception of art. Alongside these workshops, students can also access a 30-

minute supervision with their Director of Studies. They may share a draft of their work, though only oral feedback is given.

Furthermore, the delivery and design of the assessment support students: through both the assessment brief given to students and the careful timing of deadlines. A detailed assessment brief makes clear the parameters, scope and aims of the exercise and the purpose of the assessments in relation to their wider learning on the Tripos. Additional resources are also provided on Moodle. It is helpful for students to have examples or templates of new or unfamiliar forms of assessment: past submissions are shared, as well as examples drawn from professional contexts. This, along with the skills sessions and supervisions, where questions can be asked, works to assuage anxiety. The assessments are timed carefully to spread the deadlines alongside the other assessments on the Tripos and the dedicated skills workshops they must attend.

Staff are provided with the same information as students to guide them in supervising these assessments. Prior to implementation and for two years following, all staff attending Teaching Committees on the portfolio assessment were consulted on its limitations and value. This led to reshaping of minor elements and calibrations to the brief to allow students greater flexibility while remaining rooted in encouraging their collections- and gallery-based learning. The course convenor remains on call to answer questions about the assessment from supervisors or students, alongside the UTO Governance meetings where new colleagues can be inducted into the process of supporting these assessments.

Geography: coursework across a whole Tripos

Coursework is a component of assessment in all three years of the Geographical Tripos. This format of assessment requires students to develop and demonstrate a range of subject-specific and transferable skills associated with the discipline beyond those associated with essay writing. The skills and methods are embedded into the curriculum and taught at Part IA and IB, alongside research training for the Part II dissertation.

At Part IA, coursework – while not contributing to the final degree classification – is weighted at 20% of the class with a two-part submission of 1,000 and 1,500 words. For Part IB, students take four papers, each of which has a compulsory piece of coursework. These are limited to 2,000 words and weighted at 33.3%,

contributing 30% to the final degree classification. There is greater variance at Part II, as students take four papers from a range of thirteen options: in 2024-25, there were only three without a coursework element, and one paper is entirely assessed by coursework (three pieces). The coursework word limit for Part II is 3,000. Some papers include fieldwork, and the collection of data contributes to assessed coursework.

Coursework takes a variety of forms on the Geographical Tripos, as illustrated here:

Part IA

- GIS and cartography
- Critical analysis of an object in the context of decolonising museum collections
- Data analysis and coding: introductory statistics

Part IB

- A critical report on a students' experience of lab work and challenges associated with sample preparation and data collection
- A modelling exercise
- A proposal for a funded research project
- A policy brief for a hypothetical UN programme
- A discourse analysis and coding of different types of published material, including film, video games, news articles, artwork
- The collection of primary data on a fieldtrip and analysis of secondary data
- Multivariate data analysis and spatial statistical methods

Part II

- A strategy document assessing multi-hazard risks, including group work for formative feedback in preparation for submission of an individual report
- Data analysis, coding and interpretation applied in a variety of different geographical contexts
- An extended essay, policy critique and review, personal reflection on a geographical topic, grounded in the relevant literature
- An investigation of the geographical significance of a material object
- A recorded speech of 7-8 minutes, together with a commentary (in 2023-24 this took the form of a podcast and commentary of equivalent length)

- A geographical analysis of a physical space, currently Cambridge Crown Court; accessed through either an organised visit or archives / recorded hearings

While each paper supports students in different ways, the team have developed some common practices. These include a lecture which introduces the task and usually one or more timetabled Q&A sessions scheduled in good time for the submission date. Sometimes these are complemented by a Google Doc to which students add questions ahead of a Q&A lecture. This gives them anonymity, aimed at overcoming any anxieties they may have at asking questions publicly. For some skills, notably IA and IB statistics and coding, there are additional timetabled drop-in sessions for students needing more individual support outside of the scheduled practical classes.

It is department policy that traditional supervisions are not given in support of assessed coursework, and there are specific marking criteria for coursework separate from those for written examinations. These are published in Michaelmas Term and discussed with students so that they understand what markers are looking for. Feedback is provided on all pieces of coursework, but only at the end of the year, given the submission dates and timing of marking.

Staff have found that many students are anxious about coursework, particularly as recent reforms to A-levels mean that they often arrive with little prior experience. Providing regular support, both in person during lectures and practicals and through follow-up emails, can help to build confidence. A consistent approach to communication is also essential. To avoid confusion, it is helpful to designate a single member of staff to manage queries, and to ensure that all teaching staff, including demonstrators, refrain from offering guidance unless they are certain of the correct answer. A policy of not responding to individual student emails can help to ensure that all students receive the same information, and this can be communicated in advance to manage expectations.

Planning submission deadlines well in advance is crucial both for students and staff. Where students are completing coursework for multiple papers, it is important that deadlines are spread across the year, rather than concentrated in Easter Term. A previous approach, which relied on students self-pacing their submissions, led to significant stress when work was delayed until the last minute. Clear deadlines also support administrative planning, enabling staff to prepare Moodle submissions, distribute cover sheets, and manage marking

logistics effectively. Markers benefit from clarity around timelines, particularly when submissions are staggered across terms, and should be advised early whether marking will be required during busier teaching periods or can be deferred to later in the year.

Marking criteria also require careful consideration. A consistent set of marking criteria across papers can support both student understanding and marking consistency, although some variation may be needed to reflect different task types. Geography recently introduced simplified criteria for Part IA, aiming to improve clarity for both students and staff. Consistency of feedback remains a key concern for students, particularly when coursework is marked by multiple assessors. Staff should be aware that marking coursework is time-intensive and plan accordingly.

Finally, it is important to ensure that coursework is proportionate in scope; even low-weighted tasks can lead students to spend a disproportionate amount of time on them. Tasks should be designed with realistic expectations of student time and workload. Coursework questions should be updated annually to avoid the risk of reuse, and students should be reminded about plagiarism, collusion and the appropriate use of AI when completing their assessments.

Engineering: a portfolio towards accreditation

The Part IIB Engineering Project is a year-long programme of work which accounts for 50% of the MEng year of the Engineering Tripos. The portfolio consists of and assesses the overall performance of: two presentations, an interim report, a final project report. This coursework assessment has been designed with accreditation standards in mind, which require engineering students to be able to bring together their knowledge and skills developed through their studies to solve 'complex problems'. The project enables students to have some agency over their studies to work on an area of their choice to employ the knowledge, skills and understanding they have learned during their time on the Engineering Tripos.

Importantly, the assessment process is designed to support students with greater familiarity with traditional examinations to engage with presentations and long-form written work. At the end of Michaelmas Term, students are tasked with a formative presentation before they complete the summative presentation later on. It provides students with an opportunity to practise their presentation

skills and introduce them to the task in a supportive and developmental environment. Students speak to small groups of peers to receive written feedback on their presentations – with accommodations for students with a condition or disability that impacts their ability to present, or students undertaking projects of a sensitive nature, to speak just to assessors.

The Technical Milestone Report is, equally, an opportunity to practise skills required for the final report. It also invites students to engage with key skills required for the discipline and future professions, such as project management, time planning, and setting realistic goals for the project's success.

The department ensure that there are weekly meetings between the supervisor and the supervisee to provide continuous feedback on the development of the project. As this coursework requires students to undertake the work over a longer and sustained period of time, it is vital to keep the project on track through these regular monitoring and feedback interactions. With this in mind, students are expected to produce a GANTT chart as part of their project report, which has proven to be beneficial for students in undertaking the project – particularly those with SpLDs that affect time management – as it helps to break down the largescale project into a manageable structure across the year.

Modern & Medieval Languages: video creation

For second-year students there is a 'Media' course – i.e. 'German through Media', 'French through Media', etc – which is assessed through coursework. This is a component of the wider Language Paper, which is assessed by an end-of-year in-person examination that requires students to translate from English into the language being studied. The 'Media' course, which replaced a listening and comprehension exam in 2022, is weighted at 30% of the total paper. The overview of the course assessment presented here is from the German language; other languages may vary in their practices slightly.

For this coursework assessment, students produce a 5-7-minute video in the language they are studying, submitted in Week 4 of Easter Term. The video can be on any topic within those explored on the course – with the final decision on topic being made in conversation with their supervisor. The video content must engage critically with the chosen topic, and must include a minimum of 500 words spoken by the student. In addition to the video, the student must submit a 200-word synopsis of the content. The format of the video is not prescribed:

students can choose the format that best suits their needs. The content and language are equally weighted (50% each), and it is important to stress to students that the assessors are not looking for 'slick productions' but for genuine critical engagement with the topic, and for clarity and coherency of expression.

The course is guided by a set of explicit learning outcomes for students. To achieve these outcomes, students receive 8 hours of course teaching time and 8 hours of supervision in total. In classes, students are able to practise discussion of authentic video clips, summaries, comprehension, work on vocabulary and grammar, pronunciation, and pro and contra debating. In addition, the classes teach and discuss the wider cultural context of the topics discussed in the video clips. Alongside the learning on this course sits the content and teaching for the language translation classes and the lecture series on topics relating to the themes explored on the 'Media' course: both feed into the students' overall progression on the paper.

Students are provided with a course programme at the beginning of each term. They receive formal feedback on their written summaries, argued responses, scripts and videos by class teachers and supervisors. All supervisors are aware of the deadlines set for homework for the classes so that they can avoid clashes or bunching of deadlines. For the assessed video, students are not allowed to receive feedback from a teacher or supervisor: it must be their independent work.

There is one Moodle site for students and a separate one for staff. The latter is used to exchange teaching material and ideas for supervisions. All involved in teaching are provided with a programme for the term, templates for handouts, links to resources, and links to films. There is also help for teaching staff who are unsure about the use of technology (i.e. how to record and edit video clips). There are 'how to' videos but also one-to-one support available. The IT support team in the MMLL Faculty are also able to advise and help. It is worth noting that students are not all 'digital natives', so many of them do not have prior experience of video editing. This is nonetheless a worthwhile assessment format because, alongside the fun of teaching the course, students have the opportunity to be develop skills they may need to be able to demonstrate after graduation (e.g. presentation, free speaking, video editing). This course also provides them with the autonomy to choose a topic they are enthusiastic about and present this in a way they feel comfortable with. This has seen students who

are normally reluctant to speak in front of others come out of their shell and demonstrate their presentation skills.

Natural Sciences (Pharmacology): video creation

In Part IB of the Natural Sciences Tripos, students taking the Pharmacology course are assessed by pre-recorded videos in which they must describe the pharmacological properties of a drug, chosen from a list of options. This assessment task is based on the '3-minute thesis' competition, and so their videos must be 3 minutes long. The coursework task takes place across the term, where sessions have been removed from the practical class schedule to provide some of the time needed. Students are introduced to the task in a session at the start of term, which describes which aspects of the chosen drug should be the major focus of the video, and includes advice on researching their topic and how to create the video. Two examples (of contrasting styles) are provided to demonstrate that there is not a single way to format or produce the video.

In Week 4, students prepare an early draft of their video to share with lecturers – each drug on the list has a designated lecturer – for informal feedback. Students then draw on this feedback to develop their final version for submission for summative assessment later in the term. Feedback on the draft is developmental in nature and concerns what aspects of the drug the student could investigate further and broader structural considerations for the video. When submitting their final version, students can opt to allow their video to be viewed by other students after the submission deadline has passed. From experience so far, approximately half the class opts to do this. Other students can then view the videos and vote for their favourite. This gives an opportunity for students to see how other students approached the same task. The marking criteria for this task are provided to supervisors as well as examiners, and supervisors have expressed that these specific criteria have been useful in supervision discussions with students.

This has been a popular assessment task among the students. Several features help it to work well. First, the students are applying the concepts learnt in the course to a tightly focused topic. This makes it clear what is in scope. It also makes the video easier to mark. Second, there are example videos provided that show what a successful task might look like. These were recorded by two lecturers so that there were examples even in the first year of the assessment.

Third, there was some course time cleared for the task. This may not be enough time for it to be fully completed – some independent study time is needed – but helped students to appreciate that this was a replacement assessment, not an addition. Fourth and finally, feedback on the draft video appears to be appreciated by students. It is important that all those providing feedback do so in a timely manner. This may make it difficult to scale the task to very large cohorts (it is working well with the c.70 students we have per year), although alternative feedback routes such as using PhD students or peer feedback might help.

In-person (invigilated) digital examinations

Natural Sciences (Plant & Microbial Sciences): promoting equitable formative student support for long-answer essays

For the Part IB paper *Plant & Microbial Sciences*, students are required to complete four long-form typed essays online, on lecture topics covered within the course: three topic-specific essays and one synoptic essay for which students synthesise concepts from across the course. To support students in undertaking this assessment, a range of activities are embedded into the curriculum.

In Week 2 of Michaelmas Term, practical class time is given to essay writing skills, including a talk on best practice, the 'step up' to Part IB, links to further resources, and a feedback sheet for essays. Across the academic year, students are provided with supervision feedback on their essays; supervisors are requested to set and mark work every week with around half of these pieces of supervision work being essays.

Additionally, there is an optional structured session on the synoptic titles in Easter Term, available to all students. This session works to make explicit the themes that run through the course and demonstrate how the connections between topics have been built. In the session, students are split into groups to formulate and plan answers to past paper synoptic essay titles. The groups then come back together to discuss their responses, which emphasises the different ways that they could approach the title and define the scope. The session is facilitated by an academic familiar with the breath of the course, which means that students get to explore these connections regardless of whether their usual weekly supervisor has that breadth of understanding or not.

Support for staff on this paper primarily focuses on supporting the supervisors who deliver formative feedback to students. Equitable support for students is a priority, so we have a supervisor coordinator in the department who collates and curates supporting resources for supervision delivery, including marking. The coordinator also checks in with students and supervisors proactively. Resources which have been created for supervisors include example marked essays (contributed with permission from past students and supervisors) – demonstrating both answers to titles but also an appropriate level of feedback annotation – guidance on how to estimate grades for supervision work, a synoptic essay advice sheet, and examples of the themes-highlighting exercise from the student session. Supervisors also have the opportunity to contact the supervisor coordinator and ask for second marking and discussion on a batch of essays to help them develop their practice in gauging a grade, and to support a constructive level of annotation / feedback on a piece. This all helps to standardise the experience of the student cohort.

Natural Sciences (Plant & Microbial Sciences): embedding formative support for the short-answer questions format throughout the curriculum

For the Part IB paper *Plant & Microbial Sciences*, students complete ten short-answer questions focused on the practical component of the course. These are drawn from the Experimental Science strand and include tasks such as calculations, data interpretation and evaluating experimental methods. The paper is taken online under closed-book conditions and is completed in around two hours. While answers are typed, students can also include hand-drawn diagrams where relevant.

To support students in preparing for this assessment, formative opportunities are embedded throughout the academic year in short, accessible formats. One such opportunity occurs during practical sessions. For example, during a 20-minute enzyme incubation period – which was previously unstructured downtime – students are invited to attempt a past paper question written by the lead demonstrator. Feedback is then provided directly by the demonstrators within the session. This approach has received highly positive feedback from students and is now a regular feature of the course.

In addition, an optional structured session runs in Easter Term available to all students. This session is designed to make the assessment format transparent:

it introduces the different types of questions students may encounter, walks through selected examples (often drawn from past papers) and guides students through interactive group work to explore and answer them. The session concludes with a whole-cohort discussion to consolidate learning and demonstrate the different valid approaches to answering. This is led by a member of the teaching team who has broad familiarity with the course, enabling them to highlight the implicit through processes that examiners use when designing questions. Students are also provided with a curated selection of past questions with exemplar suggested answers. These exemplars are shared directly with students rather than only through supervisors, as a deliberate move towards more equitable access to support materials. This collection allows students to see a range of possible responses and understand who constitutes a strong answer.

Support is designed to be 'little and often', with opportunities to practise beginning as early as Week 1 of Michaelmas Term. This regular low-stakes exposure to assessment-style questions helps to demystify the format and build confidence incrementally across the diverse content areas of the course. The strategy also aligns with broader departmental aims of embedding authentic, formative experiences into the curriculum in sustainable and scalable ways.

Staff are provided with the same exemplar materials and are encouraged to incorporate these into their supervisions. Drawing from existing past paper questions has reduced workload for both academic and practical teaching teams, while increasing the quality of feedback students receive. The success of this approach has been recognised at the Course Management Committee and is being shared more widely across the department.

Presentations

Psychology: three short presentations

Presentations are used as an assessment format in the Psychological & Behavioural Sciences Tripos for the paper *Advanced Topics in Social and Applied Psychology*. There are three for this paper, each consisting of an 8-minute presentation followed by a 5-minute question and answer session. The students must take responsibility for developing three presentations. At the start of term, they are provided with a range of potential questions to respond to in their

presentations and must select one from each of the three separate lecture blocks across the paper. The presentations are scheduled to take place at the start of Easter Term, before the main exam period.

At the start of Michaelmas, a short introductory video about the presentation assessment is uploaded to Moodle alongside all necessary details on this paper's assessment. In Lent, a detailed guide to the presentation assessment is provided, which gives practical advice about all elements and what to expect. The marking criteria are also provided at this point to ensure clarity for each criterion. The supervisions for this paper support students through providing opportunities for them to practise giving their presentations and receiving feedback. Finally, the final lecture of one of the modules is also allocated for students to practice giving their presentations, now in a large-group setting.

To support supervisors in their role supporting students, the department provides a training session to calibrate expectations, explore the marking criteria, and discuss the presentation format requirements. This is further accompanied by a separate video outlining the expectations of the presentation assessment. Importantly, the team facilitate a discussion amongst the assessors to consider the evidence regarding implicit biases that are evident at the population level, but also asking assessors to reflect on what implicit biases they might bring to the assessment.

This format of assessment is administered by the department directly, which gives greater control over the assessment but does have administrative consequences for the department. This increased control enables greater choice over the assessment timetable and room booking; we select rooms with separate entrances and exits to help with the flow of students on the day. Students do not give their three presentations back-to-back but are instead given a mix of days and, where possible, times of day (morning, afternoon and evening). The team make a separate accessible version of the timetable which is screen reader-friendly for those students who need this.

We advise colleagues interested in this format of assessment to be mindful of how the presentations are recorded for moderation purposes (video segments rather than an entire day makes it easier to find individual presentations) and the examination adjustments application process timings (as these can be different from examinations).