

Recommendations for the Administration of Coursework and Feedback

Introduction

This document provides a series of recommendations of best practice that Engineering Departments can aspire to when designing, or improving, their procedures for administering coursework. The objectives are to ensure that students experience a healthy mixture of different forms of continuous assessment and that they receive timely and informative feedback throughout their degree.

Departments are free to adopt, or adapt, any or all of the recommendations to match their needs and resources.

'Coursework' here is taken to mean any piece of work that is undertaken outside of formal written examinations including, for example, hard-copy or on-line submissions, log books, essays, technical reports and so on.

Recommendations

1. **Get the balance right.** Course organisers (e.g. DUGS), should ensure that students are exposed to a balanced mixture of coursework assignments including, for example, assessed and unassessed work, individual and group work, laboratory work and written assignments, as befits their programme of study.
2. **Adopt the right mindset.** Coursework designers should adopt the mindset that the main purpose of a piece of coursework is to help students acquire key knowledge and skills relevant to the course, rather than seeing a coursework as a vehicle for producing a mark. In addition, the communication of the extent to which a student has succeeded (both strengths and weaknesses) should be one of the key driving factors in the design and administration of each exercise.
3. **Plan ahead.** When designing a coursework exercise, it is important to ensure that work is being set for the right reason and that the planned feedback and assessment are appropriate to the exercise. It is also important that the time taken to complete the exercise realistically reflects the volume of course material covered by the work, relative to the course as a whole. Appendix A contains a flowchart that may be useful when planning a new coursework.
4. **Communicate expectations.** Details of the objectives and relevance of each piece of coursework should be communicated clearly when a coursework is issued. Where there are specific expectations of the students for a particular exercise (e.g. students may be expected to find certain things out for themselves or to focus on a specific aspect of an open-ended problem) those too should be made clear. Many of the

problems that arise with courseworks are to do with inadequate communication of expectations in advance.

5. **Focus on feedback.** Students value the quality of feedback above all else. Simple, relevant feedback is critical to the learning process for any student, encouraging them to learn the right material at the right time and enabling them to measure their progress. Well designed feedback should show students where they have gone wrong and how they can improve next time; it is also a motivator for students who excel. In particular, when a student does well they need to know why in order that they can apply similar techniques to other areas of their study.
 - 5.1. **Get the language right.** Feedback should provide a rationale for the mark that has been given whether good, bad or indifferent. Markers should remember that students can be sensitive to the language that they use and that feedback comments need to be carefully phrased. Even when being critical students still need to feel good about something.
 - 5.2. **Prepare the markers.** When assistants are involved in marking, the lecturer should communicate their expectations clearly to the assistants, for example via briefing sessions, marking schemes, samples of marked-up work etc. A good practice is have every assistant mark identical copies of one or two sample submission up front and then iron out any inconsistencies in feedback before distributing the rest of the submissions.
 - 5.3. **Monitor quality.** Lecturers should ensure that all feedback and marking is of the required standard before returning work to the students. Students should also be told to report any problems with feedback immediately to the lecturer concerned. Where problems arise lecturers should take the matter seriously and should take immediate action to address the problems raised.
6. **Publish the schedule.** Wherever possible the schedule of coursework for each term should be published at the start of each term to ensure that submission deadlines are evenly spread and to allow students to plan ahead. For each exercise the issue date, the submission deadline and the deadline for the return of marked-up work should be published, e.g. as part of the exercise specification or on the Departmental intranet.
7. **Get it back on time.** The time between submission and return of coursework will vary greatly, depending on the exercise and degree programme. For 'formative' (progressive) exercises, which contribute to, or reinforce, other aspects of a course, a maximum 14-day turnaround time should be adhered to, consistent with the College norm. In some cases the turnaround time might need to be substantially shorter, e.g. for intensive courses with weekly tutorials. For some larger-scale 'summative' or 'final' assessments, the turnaround time may need to be longer than the 14-day norm, but this should be agreed ahead of time with the relevant DUGS, or equivalent. Once a deadline has been set markers should adhere rigidly to it.

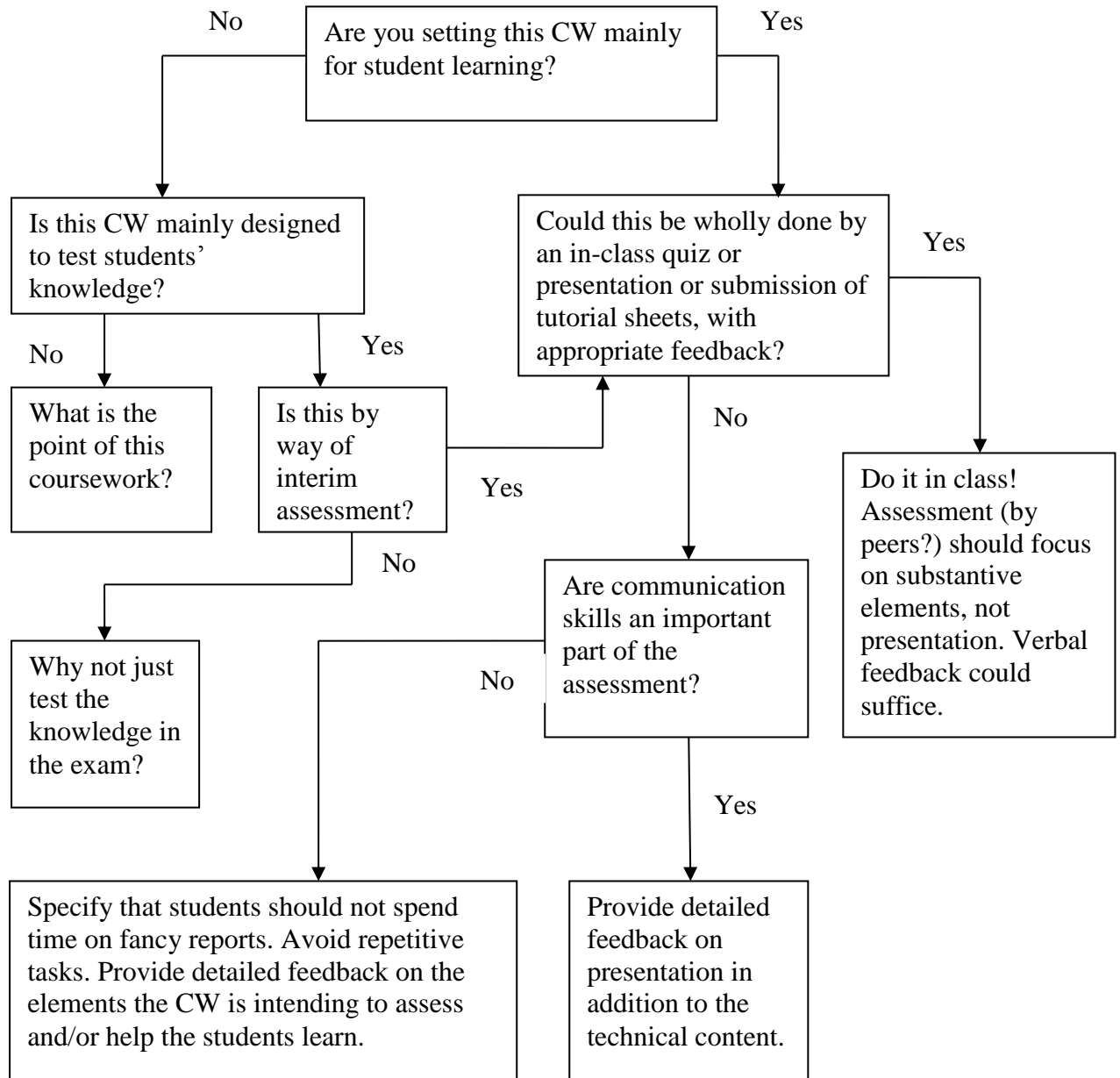
8. **Reduce the Marking Burden.** The marking burden on academics can be substantially reduced in a number of ways, for example by:
- Setting fewer or smaller exercises
 - Seeking alternative, possibly more lightweight, approaches to assessment and feedback (see Appendix B).
 - Getting students to work in groups. This can enhance the learning experience in many cases and inherently reduces the number of submissions that need to be marked.
 - Imposing a hard limit on the length (measured by word count or number of pages) of each submission.
 - The use of carefully trained Undergraduate Teaching Assistants¹ (UTAs), PhD students and RAs to assist with marking and feedback.
 - The use of pre-prepared lists of common remarks (feedback “statement banks”) to avoid manual replication of identical or similar comments.
9. **Don’t make excuses.** When planning a coursework, lecturers should ensure in advance that they have the time and the resources available to provide appropriately detailed feedback by the agreed deadline. If a lecturer knows in advance that they cannot provide quality feedback within the allotted time for marking then they should not set the exercise in the first place; instead they should reduce the scale of the exercise or choose another form of assessment (see Appendix B). If a return deadline is missed or if the quality of feedback is inadequate then the lecturer concerned will be held solely responsible.
10. **Get administrative help.** Where resources allow, administrative support for coursework administration should be put in place, e.g. via the student administration office, or similar. Support procedures that can help includes the printing of electronic submissions, delivery of coursework submissions to the relevant lecturer for marking, the issuing of reminders as feedback deadlines approach and ensuring that marked work is collected promptly by the students.
11. **Broaden the scope.** There are many useful forms of assessment and feedback that can enhance the learning and teaching experience, such as those outlined in Appendix B. A diversity of techniques could be used within one degree programme or possibly within a course to replace or supplement existing procedures. Simple adjustments can often result in substantial improvements.
12. **Consider extending feedback to examinations.** Departments or individual lecturers may consider providing feedback on examinations as well as coursework. In these cases, markers of non final-year examination papers should produce a summary of key observations regarding the quality of answers, including common strengths, pitfalls, misconceptions

¹ Undergraduate Teaching Assistants (UTAs) can be used as markers where the material is zero weighted, and are highly recommended.

etc. This should be fed back (e.g. by email or verbally) at the start of the following session. This is particularly relevant to progression within the degree programme, for example where a member of staff teaches a follow-on course in a subsequent year.

13. **Plagiarism.** All students should be made to adhere to the College's policy on plagiarism and any additional guidelines on plagiarism set out locally within Departments. The relevance of the plagiarism policy to coursework exercises in particular should be made clear.

Appendix A: Flow Diagram for Setting Coursework



Appendix B

The following are examples of different assessment and feedback mechanisms that could be considered to replace, or supplement, existing forms.

Clickers: Use clickers in lectures and tutorials to provide students with instant feedback on their knowledge and understanding of key principles. They can also be used to monitor and/or assess student participation and performance.

Tutorials: When tutorials and supervision sessions work, they are uniquely rewarding for both staff and students. At the end of the day tutorials are what you remember, and your students remember you as a tutor who gave them feedback. Feedback and tutorials are intricately linked: 'once students get the message that staff are interested in them as people and not just as skilful performers they acquire the confidence to try out their own ideas'. Indeed it can also be said that the essential prerequisite for success is the establishment of trust and confidence between the staff and the students, treating each other with respect.

Electronic feedback and feedback statement banks: Collate a structured listing of carefully phrased feedback remarks you most often use for a particular assessment. This can be used in conjunction with electronic marking-up of submissions, e.g. by annotating pdf files.

Marking checklists: Produce a checklist of assessment criteria, onto which the feedback to students is written. This enables students to receive their feedback in a highly structured manner; include a blank box for individual comments.

Self assessment: This allows students to provide an initial self assessment at the end of their assessed work, according to a set grid or checklist of assessment criteria. Even if the work is ultimately marked by the lecturer, this can help students understand the strengths and weaknesses of their approach and the final mark awarded.

Generic feedback: Provide general feedback, e.g. in lectures, tutorials or at a post-examination workshop. This is often accompanied by Model Answers which may or may not be given online or through a VLE.

Peer marking/feedback: Provide clear assessment criteria, possibly with accompanying model answers to students and ask them to mark each other's (anonymous) work and provide feedback.

Co-grading: The student and the assessor mark the work together.

Grouped needs-led feedback: Provide feedback to whole groups. Students are grouped by their need for feedback on particular content or learning.

On-line discussion boards: Provide a generic form of feedback on-line and implement a discussion forum. This enables students to discuss their solutions and compare notes.

Student-steered feedback: Ask students to suggest feedback on a particular part of their learning. This is one of the strongest means to make a student evaluate their own progress, and allows the assessor to target a student's concerns precisely.