



Guidelines for Calibrating Student Workload

Introduction

These guidelines provide information for academic staff to use when determining the appropriate student workload in a subject (8 point). Benchmarking across the sector has been completed to provide an evidence-informed approach based on synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences and assessment workload. It is important to consider comparability across subjects to consider the whole student workload (i.e., full time study of 4 subjects = 40 hours). This metric includes all the expected learning activities (including the preparation for and completion of assessment). As there may be differentiation between subjects and student cohorts, academic judgement will be vital in setting student workload (e.g., in Work Integrated Learning subjects). As a result, there are often subjects where the assessment workload is different and variation is acceptable, but the total hours of student workload still need to be factored in.

In a report to Academic Senate (2010), The CSU Subject Working Party (26 May Late paper, item 4.2), determined that it was very important to students that they have clearly defined study expectations, as it gives them a guide to managing their time (p.9). A CSU 8 point Subject was designed with the expectation that a student will normally spend between 140-160 hours engaged in specified learning and assessment activities (Recommendation 3, p.6). It was also noted that Student Administration preferred the student workload be calculated as hours/week, as this aligned with reporting requirements for Centrelink. Recent external benchmarking completed by DLT has found that hours/week for calibrating student workload is used widely across the sector.

Time-based Model

Student workload for an 8 point subject translates into a weekly workload of 10 hours/week (i.e., full-time student workload of 4 subjects = 40 hours/week). This includes ALL learning activities and assessment (preparation and completion).

- Assessment workload for an 8-point subject should be approximately 30% of the learning hours, or 42-48 hours (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). However, the learning time allowed for assessment may scale to the capability of the students to allow additional time for students to develop their capacity for academic skills and discipline knowledge. In this model this translates to approximately 3 hours/week.
- External benchmarking shows that 3 hours/week for the subject should be contact learning experiences (synchronous/F2F).
- The remaining 4 hours would be dedicated to self-directed learning experiences (asynchronous).

Table One – Indicative student workload for an 8 point subject (hours/week)

Assessment Workload (including preparation and completion)	Contact Learning Experiences (Synchronous/F2F)	Self-directed Learning Experiences (Asynchronous)
3 hours/week	3 hours/week	4 hours/week

Assessment workload

Word-based model

For some disciplines word count is an appropriate method of calculating assessment workload for subjects. The following table provides indicative word counts by level of subject, using the generic essay word count:

Table Two – Indicative word counts by credit point and level

Level	Essay words per credit point	Total essay words – all assessment items
Undergraduate 8cp subject	Approx. 470-560	3750-4500
Postgraduate 8cp subject	Approx. 560-800	4500-6500

As not all assessment items will be essay-based the following equivalencies table is provided as a guide. The equivalences may vary according to the complexity of the assignment and other criteria outlined above.

Table Three – Suggested equivalents for essay word counts

Assessment Type	Word Count Equivalence	Notional Assessment Work Hours
Written essay	1000 words	10 h
Written/Multiple Choice Examination	1 hour	10 h
Essay in a language other than English (LOTE)	500 words	10 h
Lab/practical report	1000 words	10 h
Group essay	750 words/member	10 h
Unstructured reflective journal	2000 – 3000 words	15 h
Verbal presentation	20 minutes	20 h
Group presentation	10 minutes/member	20 h
Clinical practicum assessment	20 minutes	20 h
Portfolio of evidence	6000 words	40 h

Notional learning hours for assessment could also be scaled based on the complexity of learning. The volume or number of assessment tasks would be consistent, but more hours could be allocated to students to encompass preparation and completion of the assessments to acknowledge the developing expertise, knowledge, and skills of the students.

Table Four – Example of notional learning hours for different levels of study

100 level subjects	200 level subjects	300 level subjects
56 hours on assessment prep and completion (40%)	49 hours on assessment prep and completion (35%)	42 hours on assessment prep and completion (30%)
36 hours of f2f/synchronous	36 hours of f2f/synchronous	36 hours of f2f/synchronous
48 hours to 68 hours of learning activities	55 hours to 75 hours of learning activities	62 hours to 82 hours of learning activities
140 to 160 hours of total student workload.		



Examples

100 level, 8-point subject

A Subject Coordinator is looking to calibrate the student workload for assessment in a 100 level, 8-point subject. They want to ensure adequate assessment within the subject, which also features an early, low-stakes assessment prior to census and a variety of assessment types.

Sample assessment plan

Assessment type	Word count or equivalent	Notional assessment work hours	Weighting
Multiple Choice Examination	30 minutes	5 hours	15%
Essay	1500 words	15 hours	40%
Lab report	1750 words	17.5 hours	45%
Totals	3750 words	37.5 hours*	100%

**As this is a 100 level subject, an additional 4 hours will be factored into the workload of the subject to allow students additional time to prepare and complete the assessment items. This will be achieved by reducing the asynchronous learning experiences in the weeks leading up to the assessment.*

300 level, 8-point subject

A team of academics are looking to revitalise the assessment in a 300 level, 8-point subject. The subject features Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and functions as a capstone subject for the course.

Sample assessment plan

Assessment type	Word count or equivalent	Notional assessment work hours	Weighting
Case study report	1000 words	10 hours	15%
Clinical practicum assessment	15 minutes	15 hours	35%
Portfolio of evidence	3000 words	20 hours	50%
Totals	4500 words	45 hours	100%

Post-graduate, 8-point subject

A Subject Coordinator wants to refresh the assessment items in a post-graduate, 8-point subject.

Sample assessment plan

Assessment type	Word count or equivalent	Notional assessment work hours	Weighting
Verbal presentation	15 minutes	15 hours	40%
Essay	3500 words	35 hours	60%
Totals	5000 words	50 hours	100%



2-point subject

A new 2-point micro subject is being designed and the Subject Coordinator wants to ensure the assessment is appropriate for the student workload.

Sample assessment plan

Assessment type	Word count or equivalent	Notional assessment work hours	Weighting
Verbal presentation	5 minutes	5 hours	SY/US
Poster	600 words	6 hours	SY/US
Totals	1100 words	11 hours	SY/US

6-point subject

A 6-point micro subject is being reviewed to enhance the student experience and to align assessment with industry expectations.

Sample assessment plan

Assessment type	Word count or equivalent	Notional assessment work hours	Weighting
Report (brief)	700 words	7 hours	25%
Business analysis	1200 words	12 hours	40%
Verbal presentation	10 minutes	10 hours	35%
Totals	2900 words	29 hours	100%

Please Note: It is vital to obtain feedback from students in relation to the time spent on assessment tasks (preparing and completing), as this will enable Subject Coordinators to utilise an evidence-informed approach to refine the task according to the workload required to complete the task. For example, time spent preparing for an assessment task (study for a test or researching an essay topic) should be considered part of the student workload. A quick Padlet or Mentimeter survey of your students regarding the time they spent on a specific assessment activity could be used to provide this feedback.

Reference

Bloxham, S and Boyd, P., 2007. *Developing Effective Assessment in Higher Education: a practical guide*, England: Open University Press.

Charles Sturt University (2010). *The CSU Subject*. Report to Academic Senate from the CSU Subject Working Party (26 May 2010; Item 4.2; Late paper).

