

## Guidance on Types of Assessment

This page outlines the main types of assessment used at the University and considerations for Faculty Boards and Degree Committees when considering forms of assessment.

### Formative assessment

Formative assessment constitutes a learning experience in its own right so feedback is provided at the time to identify the student's strengths and weaknesses and provide practical guidance to enable them to improve their academic performance. However, formative assessment activities cannot count towards the marks for an award.

The most common form of formative assessment at Cambridge is the work undertaken in supervisions, but it is also provided through mock exams, marked practical work, coursework, and projects (where applicable). Where formative assessment is offered, students should be given a clear understanding of how it prepares them for summative assessment or supports their academic development.

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### Summative assessment

Summative assessment measures attainment, understanding or achievement at a particular time and contributes towards the result that students receive at the end of the academic year. Since assessment is a measure of performance rather than a learning experience in itself students will not generally receive feedback beyond being informed of their grades and mark breakdown. The General Board does not currently permit reassessment or re-sits other than where required by an accrediting body or offered by the Exams, Access and Mitigation Office in exceptional circumstances.

Institutions are encouraged to provide opportunities for **skills acquisition**, though in the main, such skills are not formally or directly assessed as part of the course. Where such direct assessment does occur, for example a presentation, the contribution to overall marks should be small.

### General Board guidance on forms of summative assessment

Whilst written examination papers continue to be a significant method of summative assessment the General Board recommends that forms of assessment should be subject to regular review and that the key criterion should be the effectiveness of whichever form is adopted in properly assessing the intended learning outcomes of the course.

Since the COVID pandemic necessitated a move away from the traditional in-person examinations to alternative methods of assessment, the University has adopted an annual Framework for Assessment that has provided Faculties and Departments with a pre-approved list of assessment methods from which they could select as appropriate without the need for formal approval via the usual governance processes.

In January 2022, the Council and General Board published a joint report on extending the transition period to 30 September 2025 on the understanding that a Framework for Assessment would be provided for each year, which would include a list of pre-approved methods of assessment.

The approved framework includes the following options:

- Coursework
- Dissertation
- Examinations;
  - o which includes in-person examinations
  - o and in-person, invigilated, typed examinations which are limited to the School of Clinical Medicine and subjects taking part in the Inspera pilot phase and pre-approved by the Digital Assessment Board.
  
- Online examinations
- Practical work (organised within a Faculty/Department)
- Presentations
- Project work (which might be individual, or group based)
- Recital/performance
- Oral examinations

More details on each of these assessment methods can be found within the [Framework for Assessment for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Programmes 2023-24](#)

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### **Considerations for Faculty Boards and Departments**

When considering forms of assessment care should be taken to ensure a reasonable level of comparability across a course, so that one candidate's choice of papers does not lead to a combination of forms of assessment substantially different from another's. In particular, caution should be exercised when considering whether to permit candidates a choice of forms of assessment.

In some courses candidates are permitted to borrow papers for which the authority offering the borrowed paper allows a choice of form of assessment for their students. In such circumstances, the General Board have agreed that, should it wish, a Faculty Board may prescribe the form of assessment to be chosen by **their** candidates taking such a borrowed paper. In such circumstances, the General Board would normally expect the assessment of the borrowed paper to be aligned with that of the borrowing course and not the offered course.

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### **Possible advantages and disadvantages of various forms of assessment**

Advantages of unseen papers:

- the consistency encouraged by all students taking the same paper under (generally) the same conditions, with the examinations conducted by the same examiners;
- a concentration of the examination period, enabling candidates to collate and integrate their knowledge at the end of the year through revision, and keeping the examining load to a manageable (and predictable) period of time;
- some students prefer this type of examination;
- some subject areas, particularly core or foundation aspects of a subject, are best assessed through this means.

On the other hand, unseen papers may:

- see an increase in student workload at certain points of the year;
- disadvantage some types of student and be stressful for all involved, particularly for students less accustomed, in pre-university examinations, to a concentration on unseen papers and increasingly used to producing text on a computer;
- be perceived as leading to classification based on a student's performance over just a few days;
- mean performance is subject to unpredictable factors on the day of the examination;
- over-emphasise examination techniques and under-emphasise the assessment of other skills acquired during the course of study.

Possible advantages of other forms of assessment (see examples of these above):

- they may allow students to demonstrate a wider range of skills more effectively;
- topics can be covered in more depth and with greater care;
- student performance is less likely to be affected by particular examination conditions;
- the timetabling of the examination season may become more conducive for all concerned

On the other hand, possible disadvantages include:

- the potential for increased use of unfair means, for example, plagiarism, collusion, and increase in the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in the examination;
- the pressures associated with any form of assessment being spread over a longer period;
- an increased examining load;
- a particularly heavy dependence on the quality of supervision received;
- an increased potential for inconsistency in the examination process, particularly in instances in which candidates for the same paper are offered a choice of forms of assessment.