

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN  
QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMITTEE  
**ASSESSMENT TAXONOMY**

**1. PURPOSE OF THE PAPER**

This paper proposes a new approach to defining assessment types to improve clarity for both staff and students. The current list does not include agreed definitions, leading to confusion—especially when discussing assessments across disciplines.

The Quality Assurance Committee is asked to **approve** the creation of a standardised taxonomy with clear definitions for each assessment type.

If approved, the taxonomy will be integrated into university systems so that course catalogues and Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) display assessment information consistently. To keep the taxonomy relevant, definitions will be reviewed and updated annually if needed.

**2. PREVIOUS CONSIDERATION BY /FURTHER APPROVAL REQUIRED**

	<b>Board/Committee</b>	<b>Date</b>
Previously considered/approved by	Quality Assurance Committee (for <b>discussion</b> )	19 February 2025
	University Education Committee (for <b>discussion</b> )	26 February 2025
	Academic Policy and Regulations Group (for <b>approval</b> )	20 March 2025
Further consideration/ approval required by	Quality Assurance Committee (for <b>approval</b> )	16 April 2025
	University Education Committee (for <b>information</b> )	22 April 2025

**3. RECOMMENDED ACTION**

The **Quality Assurance Committee** is invited to **approve** this paper.

**4. DISCUSSION**

- 4.1 In higher education, traditional distinctions between "exams" and "coursework" have typically hinged on the timing of the assessment — exams occurring at the end of a course and coursework being distributed throughout the term. However, this model has become increasingly outdated. Many courses now implement substantial assessments at term's end that do not follow the format of conventional exams. Additionally, many courses include assessments with all the features of exams delivered during the term, often called "class tests." This shift has created ambiguity around what defines an "exam" versus "coursework" and whether these categories remain useful in capturing the purpose and structure of modern assessments.

- 4.2 This paper proposes a new taxonomy (Appendix A) of assessments grounded not in the outdated exam-coursework binary but rather in the distinct features and purposes of the assessments themselves. This taxonomy organises assessments based on key characteristics, format, structure, and intended skill outcomes. Such an approach will allow for a clearer, more consistent framework for program reviews, course design, and accreditation.
- 4.3 The current table of assessment types reflects a variety of formats tailored to specific learning outcomes and school requirements, leading to an extensive list of assessment types with no clear definitions (see appendix B). This variety, while responsive to pedagogical needs, has also created challenges for students and staff alike. Students may struggle to understand what each assessment entails, and staff may find it difficult to clearly communicate expectations.
- 4.4 Unclear assessment descriptions make it difficult for those responsible for maintaining assessment standards to ensure alignment with university policies. This affects the work of the Quality Assurance Committee, Internal Teaching Review, and the TESTA Programme for Assessment Enhancement. Additionally, inconsistent use of terms such as "exam" and "test" across schools or disciplines creates confusion, making it harder for students to make informed decisions about their degree pathways.
- 4.5 The proposed taxonomy would also improve the university's ability to tailor support for students who require adjustments. Clear assessment definitions would allow adjustments to be better aligned with the specific requirements of each assessment type, rather than relying on more generic applications.

## **5. IMPLEMENTATION PLAN**

- 5.1 Integrate the new taxonomy across university systems (including the course catalogue, and any other space where student view their assessment descriptions).
  - This will be incorporated into the same project planned for the Graduate Outcomes update, ensuring efficient use of resources.
- 5.2 Update course change and new course proposal forms.
- 5.3 Support implementation across all schools and disciplines.
- 5.4 Collaborate with Student Support Services to embed the taxonomy into reasonable adjustment processes to improve accessibility.
- 5.5 Collaborate with Timetabling team to support the integration with "exam" scheduling
- 5.6 Collaborate with Students' Union (AUSA, Aberdeen University Students' Association) to develop clear communication and training to help students understand the changes in assessment descriptions.
- 5.7 As part of the routine QAC approvals process, the types of assessments being considered and their alignment with the taxonomy will be monitored. This will help identify whether any amendments are needed to the taxonomy to reflect assessment design practices across the university.

Where amendments are required, these will be returned to the Academic Policy and Regulations Group and the Quality Assurance Committee for consideration before the adaption of the taxonomy

- 5.8 Evaluate sector-wide acceptance assessing the feasibility of broader adoption across the university sector.

## **6. UPDATES**

- 6.1 Updated version of the taxonomy which included some additional examples, along with a clearer heading that the list is not meant to be exhaustive. The purpose of the taxonomy is to provide broad categories summarising that capture the main characteristics of the assessment but not a detailed descriptor of every type of assessment.

## **7. FURTHER INFORMATION**

Further information is available from Professor Jason Bohan, Dean for Student Support and Experiences ([jason.bohan@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:jason.bohan@abdn.ac.uk)), or Professor Kirsty Kiezebrink, School of Medicine Medical Sciences and Nutrition ([k.kiezebrink@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:k.kiezebrink@abdn.ac.uk)).

2 April 2025

**Freedom of Information/Confidentiality Status:** Open

## Appendix A: Assessment taxonomy

### Part A – Structure

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Formative:</b> Assessment provides feedback and information primarily for the benefit of students in gauging their knowledge and ability at the time of the assessment they may include an indicative grade, they do not contribute towards the final mark for a course or degree classification.</li> <li>• <b>Summative:</b> Assessment provides feedback and information after the learning process and will include a grade; these grades contribute to the award of credit and where relevant may be included in the calculation of the degree classification</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Invigilated:</b> Assessments carried out with monitoring ensure adherence to regulations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ <b>Closed:</b> Assessments without access to any additional materials. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Lockdown:</b> Digital assessment where specialist software to prevent students from accessing unauthorised resources during the assessment.</li> </ul> </li> <li>◦ <b>Open:</b> Assessments that allow the use of textbooks, notes or digital resources.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Non-invigilated:</b> Assessments that are taken without supervision, allowing students to complete them independently, often in a setting of their choice, and typically without real-time monitoring for academic integrity.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Timed:</b> These assessments must be completed within a specified time limit, which could be a single set time (e.g., a two-hour assessment scheduled at 10 a.m.) or a flexible window (e.g., a two-hour assessment available to start anytime within a 24-hour period). Where an assessment is to be completed within a specified time window this would ordinarily be no more than a 72 hour window. Timed assessments emphasise time management and a student's ability to perform under pressure, often reflecting real-world scenarios where responses need to be both accurate and time efficient.</li> <li>• <b>Non-Timed:</b> Assessment that provides students the flexibility to complete activities without a fixed time constraint still includes a clear submission deadline. This approach allows students to work at their own pace within the allocated timeframe, emphasising the quality and depth of their responses over the speed of completion while ensuring timely submission</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Pre-released:</b> Assessments where students receive the questions or topics in advance, allowing them to prepare responses using their study materials ahead of the assessment submission. This description specifically refers to situations where students are given the actual questions they are required to address in the assessment.</li> <li>• <b>Unseen:</b> Assessments where students are presented with questions they have not encountered ahead of the assessment, requiring them to demonstrate their knowledge and critical thinking skills without prior preparation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Handwritten:</b> Assessment format in which students respond to questions using written answers, typically involving the use of pen or pencil</li> <li>• <b>Digital:</b> Assessments administered on electronic devices, where students' complete questions using software applications (not scanning of paper based) may also be conducted via the internet, where students' complete questions and submit their responses using electronic devices</li> <li>• <b>Oral:</b> Assessment where students are required to verbally respond to questions posed by an examiner or a panel.</li> <li>• <b>Practical:</b> Assessment where student are observed conducting specific task, may also include elements of oral assessment within the practical</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Group:</b> Any assessment which involves students collaborating in teams to complete (can be pairs or larger groups)</li> <li>• <b>Individual:</b> Any assessment which where each student is responsible for completing a task or project independently</li> </ul>

Part B –

Assessment Descriptor	Some Example approaches (not exhaustive)
<p><b>Extended Writing Tasks:</b> Assessments requiring in-depth written responses (minimum 1000 words).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essays: Analytical or argumentative pieces on a specific topic.</li> <li>• Reflective writing: exploring and analysing personal experiences, thoughts, or learning to gain deeper understanding and insights.</li> <li>• Creative writing: crafting original narratives, poems, or other literary works that emphasise imagination, expression, and storytelling rather than purely factual or technical content</li> <li>• Research Papers: In-depth studies on a topic, often requiring literature reviews and original research.</li> <li>• Reports: Structured report format, often simulating the expectations and standards of professional practice in their field (i.e. Grant applications, technical reports).</li> <li>• Lab book/research journal: Detailed record of practical work, including experiments, procedures, observations, results, and analyses</li> <li>• Dissertations/Theses: Comprehensive, original research projects that contribute new knowledge to a field.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Brief Writing Tasks:</b> Assessments requiring brief written responses (less than 1000 words).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short Answer Questions: Students respond to questions with concise answers, typically a few sentences or brief paragraph long.</li> <li>• Discussion Board Posts: Online platforms where students write brief responses or contributions to discussion prompts, engaging with their peers.</li> <li>• Response Papers: Brief written responses to prompts or questions about a specific reading or topic, focusing on key ideas</li> </ul>
<p><b>Objective Assessments:</b> Assessment where the questions or tasks have predetermined correct answers they usually test specific knowledge or skills rather than subjective analysis or extended explanations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple-Choice Questions (MCQ)</li> <li>• Single-Best-Answer (SBA)</li> <li>• True/False</li> <li>• Fill-in-the-Blanks</li> <li>• Matching Exercises</li> <li>• Very Short Answer (Maximum 20 Words)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Performance-Based / Practical Assessments:</b> Evaluations that measure students' ability to apply skills often reflecting real-world scenarios.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional Practice Assessments: Evaluations in fields like healthcare or education, assessing practical skills and decision-making in professional settings, or role play within these types of settings.</li> <li>• Practical Assessments: Evaluations based on the application of skills or knowledge, often in a laboratory, field setting, placements or performance space</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Musical Performance:</b> Evaluating students' proficiency in playing an instrument or singing, focusing on technical skill, interpretation, and expression.</li> <li>• <b>Computer Programming Exercise:</b> Evaluating student coding skills by writing, testing, or debugging software to complete specific tasks or solve problems.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Presentations:</b> Assessments that require students to prepare and deliver an oral and /or visual presentation on a specific topic.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Oral:</b> Delivered synchronously in person or via video or pre-recorded, these presentations assess students' verbal communication skills, confidence, and ability to effectively convey information. May or may not also be accompanied by visual element i.e. PowerPoint slides, artefact displays.</li> <li>• <b>Poster presentations:</b> Students create visual posters that concisely summarise research, findings, or ideas, may or may not also be accompanied by a brief synchronous or pre-recorded oral explanation</li> <li>• <b>Musical or Artistic performance:</b> Involve a live performance (in person or recorded) where they showcase technical or interpretive skills, such as playing an instrument, acting, or dance, assessed on aspects like skill, expression, and creativity.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Portfolios / Cumulative Assessments:</b> Portfolios may include a range of materials that collectively illustrate the student's progression within a subject area, portfolios often involve progression marking.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Materials could include written assignments, projects, creative works, reflections, and feedback</li> </ul>
<p><b>Peer Assessment:</b> Evaluation of a student's work by fellow students, providing feedback and grading. Can also assessment of student ability to provide peer assessment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Discussion Forums or Blogs –</b> Peers provide feedback on each other's discussion contributions or reflective blog post</li> <li>• <b>Group Projects with Peer Evaluation –</b> Students assess each other's contributions to a group project.</li> <li>• <b>Presentations with Peer Feedback –</b> Peers evaluate and provide constructive comments on oral or poster presentations.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Self-Assessment:</b> Students evaluate their own work and learning processes. Can also assess of student ability to self-assess</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Self-Graded Quizzes –</b> Students complete a quiz and then review their answers against a provided answer key.</li> <li>• <b>Personal Learning Goals –</b> Students set learning objectives at the start of a course and evaluate their progress at the end.</li> <li>• <b>Rubric-Based Self-Assessment –</b> Students use a grading rubric to assess their own work before submission.</li> <li>• <b>Strengths and Weaknesses Analysis –</b> Students analyze their skills and areas for improvement in a specific subject or task.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portfolio Review – Students compile and assess their own work over time to track development.</li> </ul>
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Where an assessment consists of more than one type, such as a test with both multiple-choice elements and short-answer questions, it should be categorised based on the predominant type. The predominant type is determined as the question format that contributes the greatest proportion of marks. At the discretion of the course coordinator, exceptions may be made if a different categorisation is deemed more appropriate based on the nature of the assessment. Additional descriptions of the question types must be clearly communicated to students alongside the standard description

Course catalogue details will display the following set of questions

**1. Is the Assessment Formative?**

- Yes (Formative)
- No (Summative)

**2. Is the Assessment Invigilated?**

- Yes (Invigilated)
  - is the assessment Open
  - Is the assessment conducted under Lockdown browser
- No (Non-Invigilated)

**3. Is the Assessment Timed?**

- Yes (Timed)
  - Conducted at a fixed time
  - To be completed within a fixed time window
- No (Untimed)

**4. Is the Assessment Seen?**

- Yes (Pre-released)
- No (Unseen)

**5. What is the Format of the Assessment?**

- Handwritten
- Digital
- Oral
- Practical

**6. Is the Assessment Individual?**

- Yes (Individual)
- No (group based)
  - self-selected groups
  - assigned groups

**7. What is the format of the assessment?**

Where an assessment consists of more than one type, such as a test with both multiple-choice elements and short-answer questions, it should be categorised based on the predominant type. The predominant type is determined as the question format that contributes the greatest



proportion of marks. Additional descriptions of the question types must be clearly communicated to students alongside the standard description.

- Extended Writing Task
- Brief Writing Task
- Objective assessment
- Performance-Based / Practical Assessment
- Presentation
- Portfolios / Cumulative Assessment
- Peer Assessment
- Self-Assessment

### Appendix B: Current List of Assessment Types

Assessment Type	Assessment
Coursework	Class Test
Coursework	Class Test - Multiple Choice Questions
Coursework	Design Project: Group
Coursework	Design Project: Individual
Coursework	Essay
Coursework	Field Trip Log
Coursework	Lab Book
Coursework	Lab Report: Group
Coursework	Lab Report: Individual
Coursework	Language Exercise
Coursework	Mapping Exercise
Coursework	Other
Coursework	Report: Group
Coursework	Report: Individual
Coursework	Portfolio
Coursework	Project Plan, Summary or Abstract
Coursework	Project Report/Dissertation
Coursework	Reflective Report
Coursework	Take Home Exam
Coursework	Tutorial/Seminar Participation

Practical Exam	Computer Programming Exercise
Practical Exam	Design Project: Group
Practical Exam	Design Project: Individual
Practical Exam	Oral Exam
Practical Exam	Oral Presentation: Group
Practical Exam	Oral Presentation: Individual
Practical Exam	Other
Practical Exam	Poster Presentation
Written Exam	Class Test
Written Exam	Exam
Written Exam	Exam - Multiple Choice Questions
Written Exam	Other