BA (Hons) Audit

1. Defining the Cohort

X has have about 500 students, with 250 in first year and about 125 in 2nd and 3rd year. There are 22 full time lecturers and many fractional staff and teaching assistants. In the first year, large lectures are given by full time academics and all seminars are led by teaching assistants, mainly PhDs. The student demographic is mainly local, with 60% of the cohort white male, 40% from ethnic minorities, about 10-12% international, including EU students. Y offers a pre-entry foundation year, mainly for EU and international students, from which some students continue at Y while others enter different UK universities. Student entry currently requires the equivalent of two Bs and one A, but will be shifting upwards to two As and one B in the next year.

Degree classifications are derived from 1/7 of the 1st year aggregate; 2/7 of the 2nd year aggregate, and 4/7 of the final year total. In order get the degree award, students must have taken modules to the value of 360 credit points, passing modules to the value of 270 credits, with at least 90 credits at level 6 and no more than 150 credit points at level 4. Figure 1 represents the typical experience of a single honours X student with shading for compulsory modules, and credit weightings reflected.

*Figure 1: Overall degree structure and credit weightings*

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| --- | --- |
| Year | Modules |
| Year 1 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 |
| Year 2 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 |
| Year 3 | 30 | 30 | 15 | 15 | 15 | 15 |

2. Summary categorisation of assessment

Volume of assessment: 52

Volume of summative assessment: 49

Volume of formative only assessment: 3

Variety of assessment methods: 13

Percentage from examinations: 26.5% (13/49)

Timeliness: 14 days

Volume of oral feedback: 58.5 minutes[[1]](#footnote-1)
Volume of written feedback: 7527 words

Figure 2 below represents the audit data split by year/levels.

*Figure 2: Key audit features by year [[2]](#footnote-2)*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Level** | **Types of assessment** | **Varieties** | **Summative** | **Formative** | **Exams** | **Oral Feedback** | **Written Feedback** | **Return times** |
| 4 | Exams; literature review; essays + abstract; critical analysis of research paper; annotated bibliography; quantitative data analysis; diagnostic/ formative draft-redraft essay. | 7 | 18 | 2 | 4/18 | 42 minsper student | 112wordsper script | 14days |
|  5 | Short conceptual explanations; primary source based research essays | 2 | 16 | 1 | 4/16 | 7.5 mins | 395words | 14days |
|  6 | Research proposal; presentation; dissertation; policy brief | 4 | 15 | 0 | 5/15 | 9 mins | 74[[3]](#footnote-3)words | 14days |
| **Totals** | **13** | **49** | **3** | **13/49** | **58.5** | **7527[[4]](#footnote-4)** | **14** |

3. Features of X from audit discussion

1. First year is heavily dependent on fractional teaching assistants (mainly PhD students), in particular the seminar component where lecture material and readings are discussed in small groups. The clarification and discussion of key concepts in small group settings is in the hands of teaching assistants, as is the marking of assessment. This may have an impact on the quality of feedback, marker variation and standards, student clarity about goals and standards, and student perceptions of fair grading. It is not clear how much of a community of practice exists across the cadre of fractional teaching assistants, and the relationship between lectures, lecturers and teaching assistants – for example, do teaching assistants attend the lectures or discuss the content with lecturers?
2. Timeliness: return of assessment is extremely quick – 14 days. This must impact positively on student use of feedback as it is returned in time for students to remember what they wrote. A good proportion of assessments are brief enough (some 16 x 1000, 750 and 500 word pieces) to allow for a quick turnaround, but some are longer (2,000-3,000). Given the numbers of students and volume of assessment, a 14 day turnaround is remarkable. There is a question about whether there might be a trade off between timeliness and the quantity and quality of feedback, but my sense is that quick feedback is like gold dust and therefore not worth surrendering for the chance of better quality and higher volumes of written feedback.
3. Volumes of assessment: 49 summative plus 3 formative is a comparatively high assessment load, given the average on 8 TESTA programmes of 36 summative plus 7 formative. Looking beyond these numbers, X has 16 shorter coursework assessment tasks, = or < 1,000 words. This puts the high volume into perspective but is also a good tactic for ensuring distribution of student effort and sustained understanding of theory and concepts, although some students may take shorter, lower-weighted tasks less seriously. 13 out of 49 summative tasks are exams, which do not require feedback and, arguably, are more efficient to mark. Questions about volume of assessment are (i) whether there is sufficient assessment to distribute student effort, (ii) whether the tasks are configured to promote deep learning, and (iii) how the assessment ensures that students to engage with the whole curriculum. For example: do the exams encourage ‘selective negligence’ and surface learning/memorisation of facts? Is there sufficient time for students before the exams to engage in revision which draws out higher order thinking, and do the exams demand analytical skills, or the kinds of problem solving found in case studies? Is the design of exams sufficiently challenging and complex, possibly incorporating some rehearsal activities in the run up to exams, to compensate for the lack of feedback *afterwards* with formative elements *beforehand*?
4. Formative to summative ratio: Like most TESTA programmes, X has a very low ratio of formative: summative of about 1:16. In the first year there is an excellent example of a formative task in the Introductory module with a draft-feedback-redraft cycle, made particularly powerful in that the draft is required and elicits feedback, but that marks are only allocated after the summative redraft is handed in. Students are likely to attend to the feedback. X 105 also contains strong formative elements with the high tutorial input in the run up to submission of assessments. However, overall there is not much formative assessment, which may influence how well students understand the goals and standards of their assessment. Variety of assessment (13 varieties over 49 summative tasks) may compound the problem of lack of clarity about what is expected in different assessment formats. The module handbooks provide useful advice on assessed tasks, and the convenors described examples of placing models of good practice on Blackboard for students to emulate, but it is not clear that these are programme-wide strategies.
5. Final year dissertation: The X programme builds up skills towards the dissertation through different elements of summative assessment (eg. quantitative data analysis, the proposal, long essay, research paper critique etc).

On the X course it is policy *not* to read dissertation drafts because of ethical issues and workload concerns. Draft-redraft is a strong formative element in final year dissertations in the TESTA sample, characterised by oral and dialogic processes of feedback. 2nd and 3rd years of the X programme evidence very little oral feedback, which seems anomalous given that students numbers have halved from 250 to 120, and that there is more involvement by full-time lecturers in leading seminars in these years.

 Audit summary: what’s going on?

1. Swift return of feedback (14 days) is likely to encourage use of feedback.
2. High summative (49), low formative (3), and high variety of assessment (13) may lead students to be uncertain about assessment goals and standards.
3. High variety (13) can be counter-productive if there are not sufficient low-risk opportunities to practice different assessment formats.
4. Low oral feedback (59 minutes) is likely to compound lack of certainty about goals and standards.
5. But the combination of timely feedback, clear written criteria, and high volumes of written feedback (7527 words) may help to clarify goals and standards.
6. High proportion of exams (26.5%) may have positive consequences for coverage of the syllabus, depending on whether it is easy or not for students to ‘spot’ topics.
7. Exams may lead to surface learning (memorising facts), depending on the level of challenge and the preparatory time.
8. Brief but challenging tasks (16/49) are a good way of distributing effort and sustaining engagement, especially when balanced with longer tasks as in the course.
9. In a climate of low oral feedback, reaction papers (described by Paul) provide a good means of developing the pedagogic relationship, and helping students think through questions raised by the course.

APPENDIX A

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| **X compared to TESTA Audits: Means and Ranges** |
|  | X programme | Average on 8 programmes | Range over 8 programmes |
| **Total assessments** | 52 | 43 | 32 – 63 |
| **Summative** | 49 | 36 | 26 – 52 |
| **Formative** | 3 | 7 | 0 – 19 |
| **Variety** | 13 | 13 | 7 – 17 |
| **Exam %** | 26.5% | 13.8% | 3% - 34% |
| **Timeliness** | 14 | 22 days | 17 – 28 days |
| **Oral feedback[[5]](#footnote-5)** | 58.5 mins | 7 hrs 42 mins | 37 mins to 30 hours |
| **Written** | 7527words | 7,403 words | 2,985 - 15,412 |

1. 1st Year: X 105 = 30 mins per student (averaged between three convenors, proportion of attendees, volume of time x number of assessments); rest of first year: 5% of students on a weekly basis for 10 mins (10 x 24 weeks = 240 minutes x 5% of 250 students: (10 x 24 x 12.5) = 3000/250 = 12 mins per student average). Typical first year = 30 + 12 = 42 minutes
2nd Year: **Convenor 1:** 7% of students x 2 occurrences x 10 mins = 9 x 2 x 10 = 180 divided by 120 students = 1.5 mins per student. **Convenor 2:** 7.5% of students x 20 minutes = 150 minutes/60 students in seminar groups = 2.5 minutes per student. **Convenor 3:** 7.5% of students x 7.5 minutes = 56 minutes/35 students in seminar groups = 1.5 minutes per student. Typical second year = 1.5 + 2.5 + 1.5 = 5.5 mins x 4 modules/3 convenors = 7.5 minutes per student.
3rd Year: Convenor 1 = 7% of students x 2 occurrences x 10 mins = 9 x 2 x 10 = 180 divided by 120 students = 1.5 mins per student. Convenor 2 = no third year students; Convenor 3 = no third years. Typical third year = (1.5 mins x 2 x 30 credit modules) + (1.5 mins x 4 x 15 credit modules) = 9 minutes [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Appendix A shows X audit in relation to 8 TESTA programmes. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The sample counted was from a batch of 500 word policy briefs, which probably elicit fewer words in the feedback comments. Given that about one third of assessments are tasks comprising fewer than 1,000 words, this is broadly representative over three years, but not a particular feature of third year. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The average for each year is added up (112 + 395+ 74 = 581) divided by 3 to get an average across the years (193); multiplied by number of tasks eliciting feedback (summative + formative – exams) = (52 – 13) x 193 = 7527. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The TESTA average for oral feedback is skewed by having two professional programmes (n=2) with very high oral feedback on placements. Without these two programmes, the average oral feedback would be closer to 3 hrs. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)