LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

SETTING WORD AND TIME LIMITS FOR STUDENT ASSESSMENTS

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CLT
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1. Introduction

This guidance has been produced to help staff consider their best practice in using word limits when they design their summative assessments. It should be considered in parallel to a clear understanding of devising a holistic, innovative and consistent course level assessment strategy.

It is not designed to be a policing document to monitor assessment limit offences and penalties.

This guidance seeks to provide a statement of good practice on the setting of word limits for assignments (including presentations) and is offered in the spirit of sharing practice and encouraging open debate across the University about concerns in this area.

External advisors and external examiners occasionally comment on our equivalency of word counts and many courses address this already as part of their course design activity pre-approval.

Consideration of the parameters for other forms of assessment including artefacts, portfolios and performance are not within the remit of this guidance although it may be possible to extend the general principles.

2. The key message

The key message of this guidance is that assessments should support and align with the learning outcomes and we should not be seeking a one-size-fits-all standardised approach across all courses.

Any chosen word limits will be the result of careful consideration of the learning outcomes and the best approach for the course team is to assess student learning within the context of the overall diet of assessments and the aims of the course.

Word limits, (rather like minor modifications) should be considered holistically as part of the overall design of the course and viewed contextually as part of the whole course level assessment strategy.

However, holistic mapping of module assessment consistency can be a useful way of promoting discussion in course teams on equivalence with the course level assessment strategy. Not only should summative assessment tasks be **broadly** in line with providers of comparable courses in other HEIs but course teams should look at internal comparability with courses within the Schools.

It is important for the assessment "load" for each module within a level of a course to feel relatively equal for each course. Students may perceive these differences as inconsistencies and this may affect their satisfaction and experience. Staff need to be transparent about their rationale for their assessment choices. For example, having a 2,000 word essay for one 20 credit module and a 5,000 essay in another 20 credit module can be perceived as non-equivalence by students where there *may* be a good academic and educational reason to do this. For example, word counts may vary for assessments which aim to address different learning outcomes, in different professional areas or via different means for assessment (a portfolio, an assignment or a "mock" journal paper).

Tutors need to be able to justify their assessment strategy, assessment method and word count choice as part of the course approval process. In addition, module handbooks and course and module induction sessions need to be clear and transparent about the rationale for the course level assessment strategy.

Module marking teams should meet to develop a clear understanding of the assessment criteria and marking guidelines, and make sure their students have the same understanding. Different subjects have different "norms" for assessment and this should be part of the decision making and the academic judgements made in designing our curriculum. Word limits matched to a "level" are therefore not always relevant or appropriate.

It is important that the spirit of generating innovative, varied and fit for purpose assessments (such as e-portfolio, problem-based learning and practical skills assessment, posters, synoptic assessments, posters, presentations) is not "dampened". A balanced, consistent, course level assessment strategy should ideally complement and run in parallel with this approach.

There is no need to impose a 'tariff' system to be applied universally across the University. Finding a 'norm' would be difficult because of existing variations of practice, and more significantly, the provision of tariffs can be a barrier to effective assessment design.

3. Value of setting word limits

A word limit sets a guide to students on how much material is required in the submission for the assessment. It should signal a clear expectation that students (as long as the learning outcomes and assessment criteria and outcomes are met) would pass the assessment within the word limit set. It can indicate to the student how much detail a student could go into and how potentially they could allocate time to one piece of assessed work in relation to others.

It provides students with a clear expectation of how much material can be submitted and accepted for assessment in any module. It enables staff marking student work to manage their workload and reading time by establishing reasonable limits of the submitted work.

4. Purpose of word count limit

 It is a very important academic skill for students at every level to be able to write within set word limits and word limits are set appropriate to the assessment outcomes.

The word limit should be clearly identified within the assessment guidance and identified as part of the weightings in the marking criteria.

Likewise, time limits for presentations should be set to ensure that students will pass the assessment by completing the presentation in the time set.

5. Relationship to Learning Outcomes

In establishing learning outcomes within modules, some courses may be required to meet particular outcomes set by a professional body. This may be combined with a subject benchmark in some cases while all courses will need to ensure that the UK Quality Code for HE framework is applied as the basis for academic progression. The forms of assessment used must enable students to demonstrate that they have met the learning outcomes.

The setting of a word limit for written assessments, time limits for presentations or other parameters for size and scope of student work is an important decision taken by the course team. It provides students with guidance on how much material to present for submission and complements the brief or assignment questions that identify the content requirements.

The word limit will be the result of careful consideration of the learning outcomes and the best approach for the module leader and course team to assess student learning within the context of the overall diet of assessments and the aims of the course.

6. Guidelines on setting word limits

Some universities specify normal expectations of word limits by academic level. For example:

Level	Word Count
4	1,500 – 2,000
5	2,000 – 2,500
6	2,500 – 3,000
7	3,500

This will not be appropriate for all courses across Leeds Beckett. However, sometimes it can be helpful, as part of a holistic view of the course level assessment strategy, to set a word limit for a module to "match" the number of credits. Students may then have an increased sense of explicit perceived parity. Any word count tariffs should be considered holistically as part of the whole course assessment strategy. There would be no expectation it would necessarily increase between levels 4, 5, 6 and 7. Depth and critique at levels 6 and 7 may require a similar number of words as a reflective account at level 4 or a critical incident at level 4. Final year dissertations are exceptions to this and are usually chunkier written pieces.

Longer assignments do not necessarily correlate with higher academic achievement and there are some courses where the academic team have deliberately limited the length of work at level 6 to focus students' attention, for example, to meet learning outcomes for clear and cogent presentation of complex material.

7. Type of limits

Four types of word limits can usefully be applied to assessments.

The inclusion or exclusion of diagrams, bibliography and appendices should be considered by the course/module team in setting word limits.

i)   <u>Finite limit</u>

This would usually take the form of a number of words with some indication of deviation – possibly plus or minus 10%.

ii)   <u>Range</u>

This could be a wide range, say between 1,000 and 3,000 words and may take into account the presentation of diagrams or other supporting material.

iii)   <u>Fixed top limit</u>

This would be characterised by an 'Up to…' or 'No more than.. .' statement.

iv)   <u>Open Upper limit</u>

For example, 'More than…' or 'No less than…'.

This can be of use for assessments that require students to offer reflections or personal responses to a question or set of issues. It should provide a guide to the minimum length of work that would meet the learning outcomes. This needs careful consideration before use as it could result in very long pieces of work with no sanctions.

The word count, as per the regulations, should be added to the front page of the submission and clear submission guidelines provided to clarify whether bibliographic references, in-text quotes and foot notes are part of or excluded from the total word count. The nature and number of appendices allowed should also be clarified. Students should be reminded of this as part of the course and module inductions and clear guidance should be in the module handbooks.

8. Penalties

Having clearly stated the expectations for the assessment, it should be clear to students that the word limits/time limits are set with an expectation that the learning outcomes can be achieved within those limits. It should, provided the academic content is of a pass standard, be possible to achieve the full range of pass marks by keeping to the limit set for the assessment.

With this in mind, students submitting work that does not meet the parameters set should not gain an advantage. Assignment marking should stop at the point where the word count limit is met - staff should not mark any words beyond that limit.

Presentations: Likewise, it would be transparently unfair to allow a student to continue with a thirty minute presentation when the brief is 10 minutes, similarly overlong written work should be penalised. Time limits are equally appropriate to apply to presentations "between 5-8 minutes", "no more than 10 minutes." The same rules apply – what is the minimum time allowed to enable the student to meet the learning outcomes for the presentation assessment component of the module?

However, this is only possible when **clear statements about the expectations for the assessment are made to all students within the module handbook, specifically in the assessment guidance and in subsequent briefings.**

A brief note stating that students are expected to meet all criteria, including the word/time limit is essential for both staff and students along with any penalties that are to be applied. Best practice is for the tutor to stop marking an assignment once the word limit has been reached or (with verbal presentations) clearly asking the student to stop at the agreed time and ceasing to ascribe marks from that point. This concentrates the mind of the student on the allocated time/word limit, encourages precision and student organisational skills and reduces over running and the need for complex penalty allocation.

For most kinds of written, audio or video submission the length of the assignment will be checked to the submission guidelines at the time of marking. Submissions which are

constrained by space such as studio presentations or posters can also be checked at the time of presentation.

Students should stick to the word count and to use the word count facility on their computers to help support this skill. There remains considerable debate over whether having a + or − 10% range for ascribed word counts is actually useful. Many academic staff feel that this actually should be less than 5% or not be allowed *at all* as it makes guidelines blurred and may encourage a more diluted message on accuracy to be promoted.

9. The value of formative assessment

The use of formative assessment in indicating to students the importance of meeting the word /time limits for assessments should not be underestimated. For example, a low or fail indicative mark in a formative assignment sends a clear message to students about what is expected in their final summative piece of work. Likewise, students should be encouraged to rehearse presentations to ensure they can meet the learning outcomes within the prescribed time limit. Integral to the whole assessment submission cycle should be a formal consideration of student feedback and their experience.

10. References

Leeds Beckett Course development principles: see specifically Principle 6: A Course Level Assessment Strategy

http://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/staff/files/UG_Course_Development_Principles.pdf

The PASS project: a helpful study designed to encourage staff to view programme assessment in a holistic way. http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/short-guide.pdf