

# Coursework Guidelines

Assessed coursework provides an opportunity for students to acquire an in-depth understanding of one or more of the topics taught in class. The problem(s) posed should be interesting and relevant and the assessment should measure the extent to which students have realized one or more of the course's learning outcomes.

Note that the objective is not to demonstrate that a student has mastered the bulk of, or the entirety of, a course. Unassessed problems, optional coursework extensions, exam questions, group and individual projects, UROP placements and PhD projects can all help to fulfil those objectives.

The objective of coursework feedback is to explain to students how well they addressed the problem(s) they were set, making it clear:

- What they did well, and not so well
- How they could have done better
- Why they were awarded the mark they were

## Returning work

1. Please return all coursework electronically where possible, e.g. using the Department's new paperless marking system, eMark.
2. For paper submissions, please return the submissions in class. Any submissions still uncollected at this point should be delivered to the SAO (Room 370).
3. Please organise some form of class-wide feedback, e.g. a written summary or an in-class feedback session, maybe run by your marker(s).
4. Please give students the chance to ask questions, clarify comments, appeal marks etc., either
  - a. In class
  - b. In published office hours

## Linked examination questions

For 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year courses part of at least one exam question should be based in some way on the coursework. This is to provide additional reward to students who have invested time and effort in doing the coursework well. It also penalises 'passengers' in group assignments (but see below).

## Friday deadlines

Please do not set hard copy deadlines on a Friday. This is because work handed in up to 24 hours late can still be credited (capped at the pass mark) and we need to know whether it was submitted within the 'late' window. This restriction does not apply to electronic submissions.

## Scheduling on CATe

Please set up your assessed coursework exercises on CATe at least one week **before** the start of term.

# Common pitfalls

Here is a summary of the common problems reported by students in SOLE and NSS surveys. Included is a small sample of related SOLE comments (there are many more) and some additional notes, including actions/suggestions on how to avoid the problems.

## 1. Too much coursework

“Too much coursework - it takes more than 80 hours to do the first course work. Suggestion: some of the questions can be moved to tutorials.

I spent more time on these courseworks than twice all my other coursework put together (no hyperbole at all) - something is not right here. Please decrease the content a bit, and provide much better support for the learning process.

Small unassessed courseworks which we should read the notes to complete (perhaps the exact notebooks but in a Q/A approach) would help people keep in track with the course

It became very difficult to attend all lectures, complete all courseworks without quality compromise, and to sleep and eat well. There was just too much to do at once, especially given that most people have at least some extracurricular activities or weekend commitments.”

Overloading students with coursework is our number-one problem. Every course is nominally assigned a total load of 125 hours of student time (5 ECTS). Coursework normally counts for 15% of the credit, which equates to a little under 20 hours of student time. You should therefore design your coursework(s) so that the expected *total* demand on the student's time is no more than 20 hours (10 hours for a half course). For some first and second year courses the load will be substantially less than this, as some of the students' time will be spent on the accompanying laboratory programme (please consult the relevant year coordinator). For courses with a higher coursework weighting the coursework hours will scale accordingly, but beware of non-linearities.

**Actions/suggestions:** Please focus your expectations and prune *ruthlessly* (remember that students have to learn the material *and* solve the problem *and* write it up). Make some advanced topics optional and unassessed. Use in-class problem solving sessions to get the students started - there is no harm in giving away the answers to warm-up questions and this may encourage them to avoid leaving it until near the deadline to start. Make some more advanced parts of the problem optional. Reduce the size of the problem. Impose a submission page limit, e.g. one or two sides of A4. Get students to work in pairs or small groups.

**Passengers:** If a student complains about passengers in small-group exercises, tell them to ditch the passenger(s) and work on their own, or in a smaller sub-group.

*Please remember that the students are doing many things simultaneously, including trying to socialize and have fun.*

## 2. Poor quality feedback

"I find the comments on marked courseworks unhelpful. There is little justification on why marks were deducted or where the marks were lost.

I haven't received detailed feedbacks on my courseworks (for the first one, I only got marks for each question, without any comment, that is meaningless)

Not a single comment given on coursework.

Vague feedback that says "Code needs re-evaluation" helps nobody if I don't know what I should be aiming for.

I felt my coursework marking had limited explanation for what was wrong with my answers."

Lack of feedback is STILL a major issue, despite numerous requests to fix the problem. It is completely unacceptable (astonishing, in fact) that some scripts are still being returned with *no comments at all*.

**Actions/suggestions:** You MUST give clear instructions to your markers and you MUST check that they are doing their job properly. Produce a marking scheme that is easy to follow and that ensures consistency. Generate a marking scheme out of 10, 15 or 20, rather than 100 – that involves less guesswork on the part of the marker. Check that your markers are doing a good job EARLY on, e.g. after they have marked 10% of the scripts – you then have time to fix any problems. Get markers to swap the first few scripts and compare notes.

*Please remember you are 100% responsible for the quality of the feedback. Do not hand back work unless you are completely satisfied with the quality of the feedback.*

## 3. Late return of feedback

"I received the coursework feedback 1 day ahead of the exam, which made it very hard to correct my mistakes.

Coursework feedback took too long: I am done with the examinations and the 2nd coursework feedback is not back yet.

Feedback on coursework was not available before the final exam.

Still haven't got our grades back for the coursework and its three days after term ended."

Students are extremely resentful of the fact that they have to stick to deadlines and yet we often ignore them. This is unacceptable – you MUST stick to the deadlines.

**Actions/suggestions:** Please plan ahead: you know when the coursework will be submitted, so line up your markers to start marking on the same day. Schedule a group marking session, e.g. sit them around the same table.

Please observe the following rules:

1. Please aim to return marked-up coursework **within one week of submission**, but with an absolute deadline of **ten working days** from submission.
2. For 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year courses all coursework should be returned at least **one week before the exam**, to allow students to use the feedback for exam revision. This means that all work must be returned by WEEK 10 at the latest. For other courses the work must be returned **by the end of term**.

*It may be useful to know that the average claimed marking time over the year is about 20 minutes per script. Obviously, there is a balance to be struck between feedback quality and timeliness, but good design should address that.*

#### **4. Vague specifications**

“It was difficult to understand what the lecturer really wanted out of the coursework.

The Courseworks were not really well set out, we were unsure what was truly expected of us (exemplar material would've really helped so we could see what we were aiming for).

The second coursework was extremely vague and a lot of time was spent figuring out if one had the correct output. Example outputs would be very helpful.

I believe we should not be marked down for things that we were not told would be marked in the first place

I felt that the coursework for this module required too much reading outside of what was presented during lectures. This made it seem like it was not testing our understanding of the lectures, as even after reviewing the information presented during the lectures, I was uncertain on some answers.”

**Actions/suggestions:** Make it clear what you are expecting the students to do, e.g. What are you looking for when you assess it? What should they focus on? Is the presentation important or is it the results that matter? Where appropriate, give them a leg-up, e.g. an in-class session on ‘how to tackle the coursework’. Open-ended problems are fine, so long as they come at the end and you make it clear that the specification is deliberately vague. But do your best to explain what they should focus on.

#### **5. Poor scheduling**

“There have been a lot of clashes with other coursework.

The second coursework was set very late when it would have been nicer to be doing exam revision.

The coursework was very self contained and unrelated to many of the topics in the course, so it could have been released in the first week - releasing it so late made it clash with a lot of other (necessarily late) deadlines.

The courseworks should've been much earlier, and the marked scripts returned to us, not just general feedback.”

**Actions/suggestions:** Publish your coursework schedule on CATE BEFORE the start of term. Try to set (some) courseworks early in the term. Collectively, spread out your courseworks. Don't choose a submission deadline that clashes with another coursework for the same cohort (you can check this on CATE). Don't pick a deadline at or near the end of term unless you can guarantee to return the feedback on time (see above).

# Success stories

Despite the recurring problems most courseworks actually run very well. Here are some of the many positive comments from 2017 (with some typos etc. fixed), limited to a maximum of one comment per course. There are many others.

"The *\*only\** half course which is actually a half course. Thank you. Coursework was a good length. Thank you. (imh)

The coursework system was fantastic, as was the exam system, with it being online and the feedback was very very quick. (maffeis)

The coursework was fun and creative, while at the same time very hard work. Being given the coursework at the beginning was great since we spread the work in the less busy times, more courses should do this. (gzy)

The coursework review lecture was very useful, and provided a useful insight into alternative approaches even if I did answer the questions correctly myself. (panos)

I do believe all three courseworks to be the most useful ones I have done since starting the degree: just hard and specific enough to make sure that every important concept of the past lectures was understood and at the same time with no particular magic that hard work couldn't solve. Absolute kudos! (pjm)

The coursework is definitely the best part of the course. (ajd)

The coursework was the most intellectually stimulating that I have done thus far in my degree, and the feedback provided was very thorough. (ajf)

The coursework was excellent. It forced me to properly understand the course. (svb)

The feedback on this course was exemplary, and the coursework alone prepared me fully for the exam. (pg)

Feedback on the coursework was delivered quickly and was mostly informative. I was unable to attend the feedback hour but am told it was helpful. I actually got everything I needed from my written comments anyway. (gcasale)

I liked the fair weighting of the coursework which is also a solid project that can contribute to a student's portfolio. (ajd)

I really liked the style of the courseworks for this course. They were unique and a good length to give us experience working with some of the [...] we have learned about, without taking up too much time. (rbc)

Wonderful course, the content was well-organized and we always receive helpful feedback on the courseworks. (scd/mjw03)

Whilst the content was plentiful, I thoroughly enjoyed all of the lectures, and particularly enjoyed the courseworks. (phjk)

The feedback for submitted coursework is of the best quality of any module I have taken this year. (theinis)

I am very happy with this course, interesting content and the practical and theory based tutorial/coursework questions were very useful. (bkainz)"