## Guidelines for Calibrating Student Workload

## Introduction

These guidelines provide information for academic staff to use when determining the appropriate student workload in a subject ( 8 point). Benchmarking across the sector has been completed to provide an evidence-informed approach based on synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences and assessment workload. It is important to consider comparability across subjects to consider the whole student workload (i.e., full time study of 4 subjects $=40$ hours). This metric includes all the expected learning activities (including the preparation for and completion of assessment). As there may be differentiation between subjects and student cohorts, academic judgement will be vital in setting student workload (e.g., in Work Integrated Learning subjects). As a result, there are often subjects where the assessment workload is different and variation is acceptable, but the total hours of student workload still need to be factored in.
In a report to Academic Senate (2010), The Charles Sturt Subject Working Party (26 May Late paper, item 4.2), determined that it was very important to students that they have clearly defined study expectations, as it gives them a guide to managing their time (p.9). A Charles Sturt 8 point Subject was designed with the expectation that a student will normally spend between 140-160 hours engaged in specified learning and assessment activities (Recommendation 3, p.6). It was also noted that Student Administration preferred the student workload be calculated as hours/week, as this aligned with reporting requirements for Centrelink. Recent external benchmarking completed by DLT has found that hours/week for calibrating student workload is used widely across the sector.

## Time-based Model

Student workload for an 8 point subject translates into a weekly workload of 10 hours/week (i.e., fulltime student workload of 4 subjects $=40$ hours/week). This includes ALL learning activities and assessment (preparation and completion).

- Assessment workload for an 8-point subject should be approximately $30 \%$ of the learning hours, or 42-48 hours (Bloxham \& Boyd, 2007). However, the learning time allowed for assessment may scale to the capability of the students to allow additional time for students to develop their capacity for academic skills and discipline knowledge. In this model this translates to approximately 3 hours/week.
- External benchmarking shows that 3 hours/week for the subject should be contact learning experiences (synchronous/F2F).
- The remaining 4 hours would be dedicated to self-directed learning experiences (asynchronous).

Table One - Indicative student workload for an 8 point subject (hours/week)

| Assessment Workload <br> (including preparation and <br> completion) | Contact Learning Experiences <br> (Synchronous/F2F) | Self-directed Learning <br> Experiences (Asynchronous) |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| 3 hours/week | 3 hours/week | 4 hours/week |

## Assessment workload

## Word-based model

For some disciplines word count is an appropriate method of calculating assessment workload for subjects. The following table provides indicative word counts by level of subject, using the generic essay word count:

Table Two - Indicative word counts by credit point and level

| Level | Essay words per credit point | Total essay words - all <br> assessment items |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Undergraduate 8cp subject | Approx. 470-560 | $3750-4500$ |
| Postgraduate 8cp subject | Approx. 560-800 | $4500-6500$ |

As not all assessment items will be essay-based the following equivalencies table is provided as a guide. The equivalences may vary according to the complexity of the assignment and other criteria outlined above.

Table Three - Suggested equivalents for essay word counts

| Assessment Type | Word Count Equivalence | Notional Assessment <br> Work Hours |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Written essay | 1000 words | 10 h |
| Written/Multiple Choice <br> Examination | 1 hour | 10 h |
| Essay in a language other than <br> English (LOTE) | 500 words | 10 h |
| Lab/practical report | 1000 words | 10 h |
| Group essay | 750 words/member | 10 h |
| Unstructured reflective journal | $2000-3000$ words | 15 h |
| Verbal presentation | 20 minutes | 20 h |
| Group presentation | 10 minutes/member | 20 h |
| Clinical practicum assessment | 20 minutes | 40 h |
| Portfolio of evidence | 6000 words |  |

Notional learning hours for assessment could also be scaled based on the complexity of learning. The volume or number of assessment tasks would be consistent, but more hours could be allocated to students to encompass preparation and completion of the assessments to acknowledge the developing expertise, knowledge, and skills of the students.

Table Four - Example of notional learning hours for different levels of study

| 100 level subjects | 200 level subjects | 300 level subjects |
| :--- | :--- | :--- |
| 56 hours on assessment prep <br> and completion (40\%) | 49 hours on assessment prep <br> and completion (35\%) | 42 hours on assessment prep <br> and completion (30\%) |
| 36 hours of f2f/synchronous | 36 hours of f2f/synchronous | 36 hours of f2f/synchronous |
| 48 hours to 68 hours of <br> learning activities | 55 hours to 75 hours of <br> learning activities | 62 hours to 82 hours of <br> learning activities |
| 140 to 160 hours of total student workload. |  |  |

## Examples

100 level, 8 -point subject
A Subject Coordinator is looking to calibrate the student workload for assessment in a 100 level, 8point subject. They want to ensure adequate assessment within the subject, which also features an early, low-stakes assessment prior to census and a variety of assessment types.

Sample assessment plan

| Assessment type | Word count or <br> equivalent | Notional <br> assessment work <br> hours | Weighting |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Multiple Choice <br> Examination | 30 minutes | 5 hours | $15 \%$ |
| Essay | 1500 words | 15 hours | $40 \%$ |
| Lab report | 1750 words | 17.5 hours | $45 \%$ |
| Totals | 3750 words | 37.5 hours* | $100 \%$ |

*As this is a 100 level subject, an additional 4 hours will be factored into the workload of the subject to allow students additional time to prepare and complete the assessment items. This will be achieved by reducing the asynchronous learning experiences in the weeks leading up to the assessment.

## 300 level, 8 -point subject

A team of academics are looking to revitalise the assessment in a 300 level, 8-point subject. The subject features Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and functions as a capstone subject for the course.

Sample assessment plan

| Assessment type | Word count or <br> equivalent | Notional <br> assessment work <br> hours | Weighting |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Case study report | 1000 words | 10 hours | $15 \%$ |
| Clinical practicum <br> assessment | 15 minutes | 15 hours | $35 \%$ |
| Portfolio of evidence | 3000 words | 20 hours | $50 \%$ |
| Totals | 4500 words | 45 hours | $100 \%$ |

## Post-graduate, 8-point subject

A Subject Coordinator wants to refresh the assessment items in a post-graduate, 8-point subject.
Sample assessment plan

| Assessment type | Word count or <br> equivalent | Notional <br> assessment work <br> hours | Weighting |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Verbal presentation | 15 minutes | 15 hours | $40 \%$ |
| Essay | 3500 words | 35 hours | $60 \%$ |
| Totals | 5000 words | 50 hours | $100 \%$ |

## 2-point subject

A new 2-point micro subject is being designed and the Subject Coordinator wants to ensure the assessment is appropriate for the student workload.

## Sample assessment plan

| Assessment type | Word count or <br> equivalent | Notional <br> assessment work <br> hours | Weighting |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Verbal presentation | 5 minutes | 5 hours | SY/US |
| Poster | 600 words | 6 hours | SY/US |
| Totals | 1100 words | 11 hours | SY/US |

## 6-point subject

A 6-point micro subject is being reviewed to enhance the student experience and to align assessment with industry expectations.
Sample assessment plan

| Assessment type | Word count or <br> equivalent | Notional <br> assessment work <br> hours | Weighting |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Report (brief) | 700 words | 7 hours | $25 \%$ |
| Business analysis | 1200 words | 12 hours | $40 \%$ |
| Verbal presentation | 10 minutes | 10 hours | $35 \%$ |
| Totals | 2900 words | 29 hours | $100 \%$ |

Please Note: It is vital to obtain feedback from students in relation to the time spent on assessment tasks (preparing and completing), as this will enable Subject Coordinators to utilise an evidenceinformed approach to refine the task according to the workload required to complete the task. For example, time spent preparing for an assessment task (study for a test or researching an essay topic) should be considered part of the student workload. A quick Padlet or Mentimeter survey of your students regarding the time they spent on a specific assessment activity could be used to provide this feedback.

## Reference

Bloxham, S and Boyd, P., 2007. Developing Effective Assessment in Higher Education: a practical guide, England: Open University Press.

Charles Sturt University (2010). The CSU Subject. Report to Academic Senate from the CSU Subject Working Party (26 May 2010; Item 4.2; Late paper).

