# L-Università ta' Malta

# Assessment Policy

*September 2023*

# Table of Contents

# 1. Preamble

This document outlines principles, procedures, and good practice for the design and management of student assessment at programme and study-unit level at the University of Malta (UM).  This Assessment Policy document is accompanied by a resource toolkit that provides guidance on effective implementation and practice.

All programmes at the UM are governed by this policy. Some programmes (e.g., those of a professional nature or with a large practical component) may have additional or different requirements that necessitate deviation from the procedures and practices outlined in this policy. Any such variations from this policy must be approved by the Senate. In the event of any inconsistency between any provision of this Assessment Policy document and the accompanying Assessment Policy Resource Toolkit, the provisions of this Policy take precedence.

This policy codifies and validates the student-centred cultures of assessment that have developed over the years within individual departments and faculties, institutes, centres, and schools (FICS) at the UM. It reflects the 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015)' and the 'Internal Quality Assurance Standards', as established by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA).

Assessment is intricately associated with both learning and teaching in tertiary education, contributing to students' academic journey and success, as well as to helping educators better understand the progress of their learners and support students' learning. Assessment also enables UM to issue authenticated credentials (certificates, diplomas, degrees) which serve both the student and society at large.  Assessment needs to indicate to the student, UM, and the wider society both the ability of learners and variability among students.

This policy emphasises that all members of the learning community within the UM are expected to uphold academic integrity and any other provisions as outlined in the University Assessment Regulations (2009). Recognising the prominent position of assessment in learning and teaching, UM is committed to its continued pursuit of quality and excellence through the ongoing development, implementation and periodic monitoring of this assessment policy.  Periodic and Annual Programme Reviews (PPRs and APRs) will provide the backdrop for ongoing reflections and conversations on assessment processes and the educational experience of students.

## 2. Principles of assessment

An educational institution needs to find the right balance between assessment that supports learning (i.e., the formative dimension) and assessment that evaluates what has been learned by its students (i.e., the summative dimension). In their totality, assessment practices are sound when they are intricately associated with the learning outcomes of the study-unit and programme of studies, support learning as well as contribute towards the development of a fair, reliable and valid certification and selection system.

 At UM it is expected that:

Assessment **supports learning**

a)   Assessment strategies across a programme of study include opportunities for formative assessment as well as summative assessment;

b)   Assessments align with study-unit aims and learning outcomes as published in the study-unit description;

c)   Over the course of a programme of study, learners receive constructive feedback about their strengths and areas for development, as well as clear information and guidance about what they can do to improve;

d)   Feedback focuses on students' work rather than the person in order not to undermine their confidence as learners and their enthusiasm to learn;

e)   Over the course of a programme of study, opportunities should be provided for learners to develop their capacity for self- and peer assessment that help them become reflective and self-directed learners.

Assessment **promotes fairness**

f)   Over the course of a programme of study, learners are given opportunities to show the full range of what they know and can do through the use of varied modes of assessment;

g)   Assessment criteria are clearly communicated to students, as learners need to know what they are expected to produce and how their work will be evaluated;

h)   The possibility of academic misconduct (for example plagiarism, unauthorised collaboration or use of unauthorised materials or methods) by learners is minimised.

Assessment **promotes reliability**

i)   Moderation is undertaken, aimed at strengthening the inter- and intra- assessor reliability within and across the different assessed components of a programme of study;

j)  Consistency is present in the result (i.e., internal reliability) in the different components of any one construct that is being assessed.

k)  Marking schemes are used to provide clear guidance on how students' work is assessed.

Assessment **promotes validity**

l)  The assessment result is an effective means to predict a student's performance on the learning outcome/s (i.e., criterion validity);

m)  The set work offers adequate coverage of the learning outcomes of the programme of study (i.e., content validity);

n)  The set work accurately measures the construct/s that is/are being assessed (i.e., construct validity).


## 3. Assessment methods

The approved methods of assessment available at the UM is available here:
**list of assessment methods**

At UM it is expected that:

a)  assessment methods are clearly aligned to the learning outcomes;
b)  a variety of assessment methods are used throughout the programme of study;
c)  assessment criteria are communicated to the students in the initial stages of a study-unit;
d)  the amount of assessed work is manageable and reflects the weighting given;
e)  assessment method is inclusive and equitable, ensuring that tasks and procedures do not create disadvantages for any group or individual, within the constraints of the study-unit outcomes;
f)  across a programme of study, peer assessment and self-assessment are used to help students understand the assessment process and promote life-long learning;
g)  the method/s of assessment as outlined in the study-unit description approved by Senate is/are to be used;
h)  only in very exceptional circumstances may the methods of assessment be changed, and only with the approval of the Academic Registrar.


More information and resources about methods of assessment may be found in the Assessment Policy Resource Toolkit.

# 4. Assessment criteria

Assessment criteria are the basis on which judgement of the adequacy of the tasks undertaken by learners is made. Clear assessment criteria provide the learners with a better understanding of the expectations and what is required of their work and performance. They make it clear to the learners what factors will be taken into account when making judgements about their performance. This may serve well as the most direct way learners experience what is needed to achieve the learning outcomes and to guide their own learning process accordingly.

At UM it is expected that:

a) assessment criteria are communicated to learners as soon as practical after the start of the study-unit and by being published on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for the study-unit;

b) assessment criteria are aligned to and reflect the learning outcomes, the learning and teaching activities and the assessment methods.

*4.1 Rubrics*

Assessment criteria may also serve well to complement a particular grade given to the students. Grades do not provide learners with detailed feedback on their performance since they do not indicate what the student did well or less well at specific learning outcomes. However, if the grade is accompanied with a scoring guide, it can be very useful to learners to identify areas for improvement that need to be addressed. Very often scoring guides that are used in assessment are referred to as rubrics. A rubric is often defined as an explicit set of descriptors that indicate the quality level of achievement and provides more details than a single grade or mark.

The UM General Regulations for University Undergraduate Awards (2019) and the General Regulations for University Postgraduate Awards (2021) outline mark ranges, grades, and broad level descriptors that are to be used when assessing work. A rubric should be specifically linked to learning outcomes of a study-unit as well as to the mark ranges and grades outlined in the aforementioned regulations by clarifying the expectations of an assessment task's most important aspects and the level expected. Rubrics may be used for both summative and/or formative assessment purposes.

When rubrics are used, they should:

a) provide well-defined and unambiguous criteria and descriptors in a clear and accessible way for students and examiners;

b) be communicated to students by being published on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for the study-unit.

More information and resources about assessment criteria and rubrics may be found in the Assessment Policy Resource Toolkit.


## 5. Feedback

This policy highlights assessment as a way of supporting learning and feedback to students is the primary tool used in this approach.

At UM it is expected that the feedback provided is:

a) timely and meaningful;
b) clear and accessible;
c) linked to learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

The student body is a diverse mix of students from different disciplines, with different aspirations, levels of commitment and academic study skills, following courses with specific traditions and practices in learning, teaching and assessment. Most undergraduates and students returning to education from work, however, are bonded by the leap they need to make from sixth-form level study or long periods of educational inactivity to that of higher education. They require clear, accessible, informative feedback that helps them understand the academic standards in their discipline. Particularly in their first year of a course programme, timely feedback is crucial if students are to quickly adjust to the standards required.

At UM it is expected that:

d) programmes of study should include feedback about general academic standards expected in the discipline.

*5.1 Pre-assessment feedback – assessment for learning*

Feedback can be given during the learning and teaching phase when lecturers and students engage in discussions and questions and answers, as well as tasks that require the students to become active learners and engage with their learning. This form of assessment for learning is clearly dependent on context; large student groupings require more planning for discussions or question-and-answer time to be productive, while tutorial modes epitomise a most favourable environment. In the absence of tutorials, and the over-reliance on lectures as the predominant form of teaching, taking stock of where students are in their learning and embedding occasions for discussion and feedback can still be carried out, however large student groupings are, as long as the necessary planning and resources are available.

At UM:

a) lecturers are encouraged to plan ahead on how pre-assessment feedback can be provided and make requests for additional resources, if required, well ahead of the start of the study-unit and even as early during the design of a programme of study;
b) lecturers provide constructive feedback that aims to enable learners.


*5.2 Post-assessment feedback – assessment of learning*

The dominant assessment paradigm is that of assessment *of* learning where, typically, a period of learning and teaching is followed by an assessment event. It is necessary for students to be given feedback on their performance that allows them to understand their strengths and weaknesses and to move forward. Several modes of assessment allow this to happen and are typically those associated with practical work, field practices, and written work that is returned to students. These forms of assessment permit lecturers to give valuable feedback which students can clearly understand and use to improve their next assessment.

Other forms of assessment have less potential for feedback that assists students in moving forward. Timed, written examinations where feedback is no more than a score and a grade does little to help students with their learning unless it is accompanied by the *reasons* for the grade, articulated in a meaningful way.

At UM it is expected that:

a) feedback shall be given on formative and summative assessments, including examinations;
b) feedback shall identify strengths and where improvements could be made in future;
c) feedback may take the form of individual feedback or general feedback in class or via the VLE;
d) general feedback can include common errors/ weaknesses, examples of best practice, model answers, anonymised student work from previous years, reports on what was done well, peer discussions, etc.
e) feedback shall only be provided after the period for a request for a revision of assessment has expired.

# 6. Assessment and international mobility

In line with a decision taken by the Senate in 2009, student mobility should be actively encouraged and facilitated within the different FICS through the identification of a mobility study period in undergraduate programmes of study. FICS must follow the procedures established by the International Office and which are implemented uniformly across UM. The procedures include the learning agreement which sets out the programme of study to be followed abroad and which must be approved by the student, the sending and receiving institution.

At UM:

a)  study-units followed during mobility periods as approved in the Learning Agreement shall be graded according to the marking and grading scheme of the host institutions. The approved graded study-units will be recognised for transfer to the students' programme of study in part fulfilment of the programme requirements;

b)  assessment grades awarded by a host institution are converted to the University's marking and grading scheme in accordance with grade conversion sheets approved by the Office of the Registrar and the International Office;

c)  it is recommended that information regarding assessment and grade conversion be made available to UM students well in advance. Students should always be in a position of leaving the country fully cognisant of the assessment implications of their mobility.

# 7. Assessment and diversity

The University of Malta's commitment to equity in diversity needs to be manifested in the learning-teaching process. A learning environment which is committed to equity is one which affirms diversity by creating a flexible learning environment that is adaptive to the individual needs of students.

This policy recommends more flexibility with regard to mode of assessment and deadlines for submission of assignments in very special circumstances that are approved in advance by the competent UM authority.

It is expected that assessment and feedback at UM are inclusive and meet the requirements of equality legislation and good practice.

At UM it is expected that:

a)  assessments are inclusive by design, and where necessary, reasonable adjustments are made;

b) when preparing assessments, the range of student backgrounds, experiences, and identities are ideally taken into account;

c) in the case of students with disability, consensual disclosure of the diverse needs of students is requested *a priori* with a view to helping academics address such needs and the learning community to act in solidarity with students with diverse needs;

d) assessments, assessment criteria, assessment rubrics (where used), general feedback are accessible, clear, and understandable for all students;

e) students have opportunities to discuss assessment feedback with lecturers.

## 8. Digital assessment

Digital assessment is any form of assessment that is conducted through the use of smartphones, tablets, laptops, personal computers or similar devices.

The University of Malta and national authorities already have several policies and guidelines concerning digital learning and assessment. These include:

- University of Malta Distance and E-Learning Policy 2018
- WISEflow on Campus FAQs
- University Assessment Regulations 2009
- Staff Assessment FAQs
- Guidelines for Quality Assurance – For Online Learning Providers in Malta (MFHEA, September 2021)

At UM:

a) assessment design should take into consideration both the challenges and the opportunities linked to online learning.

Given the different levels of digital confidence and proficiency among academics, the UM undertakes to:

b) consolidate its continuous professional development programme in the area;

c) provide ongoing support to educators and learners engaged in online learning and teaching;

d) guarantee the highest levels of security to users;

e) have contingency plans to cater for technical failures;

f) support educators and students in their diverse technical needs; and

g) promote access disability features available on the online assessment platforms.

# 9. Conclusion

This policy document aims to further reinforce the positive assessment culture at UM where the learning and teaching community embraces a student-centred learning approach that will enable all students to experience a successful and high-quality tertiary educational provision.

The building of an assessment culture in the spirit of the foregoing policy is dependent on the willingness of FICS to disseminate, embrace, own and be informed by the document in the process of designing curricular programmes.

To facilitate the implementation of this policy the UM undertakes to:

a) consolidate its continuous professional development programme in assessment practices in higher education;
b) provide ongoing support to educators and students engaged in learning and teaching;
c) provide opportunities to share good assessment practices;
d) invest in resources that will consolidate the assessment infrastructure;
e) enhance international networking in this area;
f) support ongoing research in the area of assessment in higher education.

The Senate approved the Assessment Policy during its meeting on 20 September 2023.

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