

Standardising modules

A consultation paper on issues and implementation

Summary

As colleagues will be aware, we need to address the problem that our credit hours per module do not match the sector norm, or the requirements of the QAA and various accrediting bodies. **As a consequence it is necessary for us to review and amend all of our undergraduate and taught postgraduate modules.**

At present, we allocate a workload of 7.5 hours to each credit of study. This is out of line with the sector norm of 10 hours per credit. More significantly, it is also out of line with the Bologna Agreement and with QAA expectations, as set out in the Quality Code for Higher Education. As a consequence, it will seem to an external audience that our students only study for 900 hours per year, rather than 1200 hours in the rest of the sector. External examiners have already raised this issue and some professional bodies have raised it during accreditations. Those accreditations have gone ahead but notice has been given that the discrepancy in workload must be rectified before the next accreditation visit.

We currently deliver more than two thousand modules in undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes, and all will need to be amended to ensure conformity with 10 hours of study per credit. Unfortunately, this cannot simply be done by adding on more independent study time, at least in many undergraduate programmes, as this will negatively affect the relative contact time for those modules (and therefore how they appear in the KIS data). This will be a particular problem for some of the undergraduate programmes in CAHL and CSS. Adding further independent study is more feasible in PGT programmes. The proposed lengthening of the core undergraduate teaching year to two periods of twelve weeks would help address us this issue in many modules.

Given we have to review all of these modules, we think it is sensible to take the opportunity to consider other issues—credit size, assessment loads and assessment variation—and discuss ways of standardising modules that would improve the educational experience of our future students and allow us to achieve greater collaboration across programmes, departments and colleges. These issues are the focus of this paper and of the consultation process we will undertake during September, October and November.

The first issue is **inconsistent module sizes**, which cause headaches for academic and professional staff, and for some of our joint honours students. A consistent approach to module size will also allow the development of major/minor combinations through the ‘pathways project’.

A second issue is **standardising assessment loads**: it is clear that there is significant variation in loading within and between departments. This will also mean developing a rubric of equivalence for different kinds of assessment tasks that will be much more transparent for students as well as staff.

A third issue is ensuring a pedagogically effective **variety of assessment tasks** in modules taken at different stages in a student’s programme. However, as ideal regimes of assessment vary widely between disciplines, we think this latter proposal and possible changes are best considered and determined by each of the colleges.

This paper lists and discusses each proposal. We also discuss implementation issues and timelines, and provide a schedule for University-wide consultation during September, October and November.

Proposals

Proposals will be presented to the Senate in November, 2014. We have no choice regarding the amendment of our more than two thousand existing modules to meet the 10 hours per credit standard, though we will need to consider how this is best achieved. The four associated proposals for discussion during the consultation period are:

1. That we adopt a standardised size for all University of Leicester undergraduate modules, in which EITHER all modules are 10, 20 or 40 credits in value OR all modules are 15, 30 or 45 credits in value.
2. That we adopt a standardised size for all University of Leicester postgraduate taught modules, in which all modules are 15, 30, 45 or 60 credits in value.
3. That we adopt a standardised assessment load for all undergraduate and postgraduate modules.
4. That all of the colleges develop and adopt a minimum threshold for variation in assessment tasks in all undergraduate modules.

Timing of introduction

In line with previous examples of significant changes to module structures at Leicester, and similar projects at other institutions, we will be able to introduce these changes for the academic year of 2016-7 for all first- and second-year undergraduate students and all postgraduate taught students, as the changes could be communicated to them before they commence their programmes. The changes would apply to distance learning as well as on-campus modules.

It would be advantageous—and possible—to introduce them for third-year students at the same time, so long as there is a carefully-planned communication campaign about the changes for undergraduate students who will enrol this autumn and will be in their third year in 2016-7.

An introduction for all undergraduates at the same time has the advantage of reducing the period in which we will need to preserve different systems, especially different module size structures. However, much will depend upon the standardised module size that we adopt, as different choices will create different scales of module and programme amendment across the University. Accordingly, the timing of the introduction of these changes for different cohorts of undergraduate students will form part of the discussion and consultation, and a recommendation will be made to the Senate meeting in November.

Discussion

Proposal 1

That we adopt a standardised size for all University of Leicester undergraduate modules, in which EITHER all modules are 10, 20 or 40 credits in value OR all modules are 15, 30 or 45 credits in value.

If all modules will need to be reviewed to ensure conformity with credit hours, it is opportune to address other problems created by our current rules (or lack of rules). One very helpful change would be a standardised, University-wide structure of module credits. There is currently a wide variation in module sizes: a 10/20/40 model is most common at undergraduate level (over 1,100 modules fit this structure), for instance, and a 15/30 model at PGT, but we also have modules of 2.5, 24 and 36 credits, among others. There are also examples of modules that have one credit weighting when delivered within one programme and a different weighting, for the same module, when delivered as part of another programme. This cannot be justified. A standardised structure—or at least a standardised structure for undergraduate modules and another standardised structure for postgraduate taught modules—will make life less difficult for some of our

existing students (especially joint honours students and other students taking up options outside their home programme), and will also make it easier to introduce greater flexibility and sharing of modules in our undergraduate and postgraduate taught offer, including the 'pathways project' and associated flexible PGT project in which all colleges are now involved.

If we are to standardise, the immediate question is what should be our common currency? That question leads to another: how should we decide? Our view is that this should be a pedagogical decision, based on what would best serve our future students (and, perhaps, enhance our recruitment of those students). It would be possible to simply go with the current dominant models, but we think that we should only do this if this also creates pedagogical and student benefit. It is also important to remember that whichever decision we make, some modules will have to be revised; particular programmes and departments will be affected more than others and will accordingly need to be supported and resourced more than others.

We have taken as one reasonable basis for the decision what will best support the introduction of a major/minor option in undergraduate degrees: evidence at other institutions suggests that the major/minor combination will prove especially popular among students and will include a large and growing share of our undergraduate cohort, so it makes sense to create a model that enhances the pedagogical value and attractiveness of this innovation. There are two possible options:

Model A: a two-thirds/one-third major/minor

This model uses a major/minor split of 40/20 credits in each semester and 80/40 credits in each year. In total, a student would complete 240 credits in their major and 120 credits in their minor. For this structure, we would need to standardise modules in a 10/20/40 pattern.

Benefits:

- This is the major/minor split in the small number of existing major/minor 'with' combinations in Science and Engineering and 'with' combinations involving Law, Modern Languages and Management; in all cases, the balance is regarded as working well.
- In most disciplines, a 40-credit minor in first year should provide a sufficient foundation for students to adjust the balance of their subjects from major/minor to joint (60 credits) for their second year, a key feature of the flexibility we would like to offer students in the 'pathways' project.
- In some disciplines, a 40-credit minor in first year could provide a sufficient foundation—perhaps with one further first-year module being taken in second year or through distance learning—for students to 'flip' their major/minor combination for their second and third year. Research on the importance of flexibility and the ability to adjust programmes after initial registration suggest that prospective students and parents would find this very attractive.
- The 10/20/40 model is the most common existing model in undergraduate programmes; about 1,100 modules are 10, 20 or 40 credits in size, compared to about 200 modules that are 15 or 30 credits in size.

Disadvantages:

- A two-thirds major only just meets professional accreditation requirements in some disciplines (and may in fact not meet such requirements in other disciplines).
- In some disciplines, a two-thirds major may be seen as providing insufficient breadth or depth for a coherent major sequence, which may in turn dissuade those disciplines from taking up the opportunity of the major/minor model.

Model B: a three-quarters/one-quarter major/minor

This model uses a major/minor split of 45/15 credits in each semester and 90/30 credits in each year. In total, a student would complete 270 credits in their major and 90 credits in their minor. For this structure, we would need to standardise modules in a 15/30/45 pattern.

Note: It would theoretically be possible to use 10 and 20 credit modules to build a 30-credit per year minor, but it would result in an uneven pattern between semesters that would introduce complexity and possible complications for the paired major. A student would need to complete 10 credits of their minor (and 50 credits of their major) in one semester, and 20 credits of their minor (and 40 credits of their major) in the other. This pattern would require disciplines that do not currently have 10-credit modules to create them in order to allow students to do majors or minors.

Benefits:

- There is a view that 3:1 is a better ratio, in pedagogical terms, between the major and minor components of an undergraduate's study programme.
- It will reduce the likelihood of problems with accreditation for professional degrees, and provide more breadth and depth in the major, thus ensuring that even more students gain access to pathways and other forms of flexibility.

Disadvantages:

- In some disciplines, a 30-credit minor in first-year may not provide sufficient foundation for a shift to a joint (60 credits) in second and third year
- It is unlikely that a 30-credit minor in first year could provide a sufficient foundation for a 'flip' between minor and major in second and third year in any discipline, thus ruling out this form of flexibility.
- The 15/30/45 model will require the amendment of a greater number of modules across the university (though this is somewhat mitigated by the fact that we are reviewing all modules anyway because of the problem with credit hours).

We will use the period of discussion and consultation to explore the benefits and disadvantages of these two models with colleagues across the institution, with a view to developing a recommendation for the Senate meeting about the model that provides the greatest benefit to the recruitment, experience and success of future students.

Proposal 2

That we adopt a standardised size for all University of Leicester postgraduate taught modules, in which all modules are 15, 30, 45 or 60 credits in value.

With plans for increased flexibility in PGT programmes, including the greater sharing of modules between programmes, it also makes sense to standardise modules sizes at this level. As we are not introducing new structures such as major/minor, it seems to us that the issue here could be resolved on pragmatic grounds, in terms of creating the least amount of work based on what we have now. Currently, more than 600 PGT modules are 15, 30 or 60 credits, while fewer than 300 are 10 or 20 credits

However, there may be issues and complications of which we are not aware, and colleagues may prefer that we should adopt the same module size structure at undergraduate and postgraduate taught level.

Proposal 3

That we adopt a standardised assessment load for all undergraduate and postgraduate taught modules.

At present, there is significant variation in the assessment loading for modules of the same credit weighting. Standardisation is common in higher education; it provides a measure of equity for students—who know that they will do similar amounts of written work or examination in modules that make the same contribution to their degrees—and provides clear guidelines for module and programme designers about expectations and norms. At the same time, of course, the nature of assessment is very different across disciplines. While our view is that we should standardise assessment loads across the institution, they should

at the very least be standardised within roughly equivalent disciplines (which might mean at college level). This should also help us reduce overall assessment loads for students (and marking loads for academic staff). Modules at Leicester have relatively high assessment loads compared to other institutions; high assessment loads can also create problems in terms of meeting student expectations for the speed and quality of feedback.

Any system will work best if it is simple. **The recommendation, therefore, is that we take as our standard that 10 credits should equate to 2,500 words of summative assessment (or equivalent).**

Clearly, colleges and departments would play the major role in developing appropriate equivalents for examinations, non-written forms of assessment and other forms of assessment relevant to their teaching methods and ambitions. We also recognise that the term 'words' is best suited to disciplines in arts, humanities and social sciences, and to coursework such as essays. Similar models can be developed for problem/numerically based subjects, in which a time equivalence is a common model in other institutions. At the institutional level, we could decide an equivalent in 'words' for examinations (one hour of examination as equivalent to 1,000 words, say), while asking colleges to develop appropriate equivalences for other forms of assessment.

Departments would still be encouraged to include developmental, formative exercises for the students as part of the module framework.

Proposal 4

That colleges develop a minimum threshold for variation in assessment tasks in undergraduate modules.

A requirement for assessment variation is another common feature of module design currently lacking at Leicester. For instance, the ideal pattern of assessment might vary at different year levels, or between modules that are always taught in first semester and modules that are always taught in second semester. While there might be an argument for 'concentrated' assessment (large exams and research projects, dissertations and so on) in the final year of undergraduate study, there is an equally strong argument for greater variation of assessment modes and tasks at first year, as well as for a relatively early assessment task to encourage student engagement and provide an opportunity for early feedback.

As the type and nature of assessment variation will differ markedly across disciplines, we propose that colleges be tasked with considering and devising such a scheme, which could be implemented in tandem with the standardisation of credits and assessment loads. It should be kept very simple and straightforward, and could include requirements or recommendations for formative as well as summative assessment tasks. A scheme could stipulate variation, or provide a set of guidelines or parameters, and it should reflect key learning objectives. Examples might include:

- In first-year modules of (10/15) credits, at least two forms of assessment, one of which should build upon a formative exercise.
- In first-year modules of (15/20) credits, at least three pieces of assessment, one of which should provide an opportunity for early feedback
- In second year modules of (10/15) credits, at least two pieces of assessment
- In second and third year modules of (30/40) credits, at least three pieces of assessment
- In required modules of (10/15/20) credits or above taught in the first semester, at least one in-class test.

Implementation

The extent of change for the University as a whole, or for particular programmes and departments, won't be clear until we make decisions about the above proposals, though we do know that we will have to review and amend all modules in regard to hours. In one sense, this makes it an excellent time to undertake some additional work that will improve the student journey and reduce complexities and inconsistencies that make life difficult for academic and professional services staff across the institution. In some programmes and departments, this might also be an opportunity to review and refresh teaching methods, assessment modes and other aspects of the curriculum. In others, this process will build upon existing or recent curriculum review projects. Overall, we think this is an opportunity—albeit one borne of necessity—for our academic communities to really examine their modules and think about what best suits their educational ambitions for the future.

It would be ideal to have modifications and approvals completed in time for the 2016-7 academic year. This will mean that the bulk of the work for departments will occur during 2015. Pending a final assessment of the extent of change, the schedule for introduction for different undergraduate cohorts and how much support will be needed in which places and at what times, we suggest the following principles:

Light touch

Where possible, this will mean 'rolling over' or 'translating' existing module specifications into a new currency, with module coordinators able to nominate preferences from a series of pre-determined options (or, of course, to create their own) about increasing hours, changing module size and standardising assessment. Coordinators can then reflect the changes in handbooks during the normal updating and editing process.

Supported

Our initial thought is to provide a group of curriculum change aides—perhaps interns or graduate assistants—who would work with departments and colleges. We have also discussed creating the role of a curriculum change coordinator, perhaps by secondment and back-fill of an existing member of staff. The coordinator and aides would undertake as much of the detail work and paperwork as possible, allowing academic and professional staff in colleges to focus on issues of academic judgement, and Registry and Quality Office staff to support approval processes. They would also work closely with college academic committees and focus most effort on departments and subject areas that are particularly affected by standardisation decisions.

Explicitly scheduled

We will work with each college and each department to identify a clear and appropriately sized timeframe for the work they will need to do. Depending on the scale of the task, each department will then have a window, with appropriate support, that will be known well in advance. Some departments will also be undertaking work on major, joint and minor pathways, and/or the review of postgraduate taught provision. This, and known events such as PDRs, can be reflected in the timing and size of their 'window' in the work schedule. In general, module and programme amendment will commence in December 2014 and end in November 2015, with programme approvals taking place between May 2015 and February 2016.

Consultation

Consultation on these proposals will run alongside consultation on the proposed changes to the structure of the academic year.

Papers on both changes will be sent out at the same time. A presentation on both proposals will be made to each of the four College Management Boards in October and both proposals will also be discussed by College Academic Committees during September and October. We will hold a discussion with students at the Student Union's Education Zone in October.

There will also be five consultation workshops, in which we will provide an overview of the proposals for comment, and engage colleagues in interactive discussions about each one.

The consultation workshops for academic and professional staff in colleges will be held as follows:

Wednesday 24 September, 1pm-2pm, Peter Williams Lecture Theatre (**focusing on the academic year**)

Friday October 3, 11am-12noon, Ken Edwards Lecture Theatre 1 (**focusing on credit and assessment standardisation**)

Wednesday October 15, 2pm-3pm, Peter Williams Lecture Theatre (**focusing on credit and assessment standardisation**)

Wednesday October 15, 4pm-5pm, Ken Edwards Lecture Theatre 1 (**focusing on the academic year**)

There is also a consultation workshop for staff in Corporate Services:

Friday October 3, 12.30pm-2pm, Ken Edwards Lecture Theatre 1 (**focusing on the academic year & credit and assessment standardisation**)

Colleagues in Corporate Services who cannot attend this meeting are welcome to attend the meetings for staff in colleges.

In addition, these discussion papers will be placed on a website, with access from the University staff page. Members of staff will be able to use a dedicated email address to provide feedback, suggestions and comments between September 24 and October 24. With the assistance of the Student Union, we will also survey current students about changes to the academic year and to modules.

The outcomes of these consultations and workshops will be shared with and discussed by the Academic Policy Committee, which meets in September and October, as well as with Heads of College, Directors of Administration and the Registrar. A final presentation, with proposals and a more developed implementation plan, will be made to the meeting of the Senate on November 12, 2014.

Mark Peel and Jon Scott
September 8, 2014

Summary of Curriculum Review 2014-16

All modules must be amended to fit the 10 hours/credit structure

Summary of proposals for discussion:

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- 2. That we adopt a standardised size for all University of Leicester postgraduate taught modules, in which all modules are 15, 30, 45 or 60 credits in value.**
- 3. That we adopt a standardised assessment load for all undergraduate and postgraduate modules.**
- 4. That all of the colleges develop and adopt a minimum threshold for variation in assessment tasks in all undergraduate modules.**

Proposed Timescale

September – October November 12 th	Consultation and workshops Recommendations presented to Senate for discussion
December 2014- November 2015	Revision to modules
March 2015 – February 2016	Programme approvals
October 2016	Implementation for first and second year (and possibly third year) undergraduate and postgraduate taught students