



DELIVERING EXTERNALLY- ASSESSED UNITS: A HOW-TO GUIDE



INTRODUCTION TO EXTERNALLY-ASSESSED UNITS

Externally-assessed programmes are becoming increasingly common and, with the move to T Level qualifications on the horizon, having the skills and knowledge of how to prepare for such assessments is critical. Many colleges are changing to externally-assessed qualifications (most notably from BTEC Qualification and Credit Framework “QCF” to National Qualification Framework “NQF”), and some are finding a noticeable drop in achievement rates, with success in external assessments being the main contributor. Some colleges planning the transition may be apprehensive about the move, but there are significant benefits in moving to these programmes and colleges should avoid being put off due to the change in assessment.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is written to give helpful hints and tips for college managers and teachers making this transition. Our partnership’s results tell us that staff with experience of delivering to an end-point assessment achieve better results than their colleagues only used to delivering coursework-based qualifications. So, what is it that they do better? What can we learn from their practice?

Before we focus on that, let’s first highlight the positive points of the move to NQF qualifications. The general consensus is that they are more robust, relevant and challenging qualifications. Whilst this presents challenges, it raises the expectations of staff and students, and raises the standards of provision. This has resulted in many universities only accepting certain externally-assessed courses and not their internally-assessed equivalents. NQF courses can have more credibility than some QCF programmes.

HOW TO FACILITATE THE CHANGE

When colleges move to NQF programmes, changes need to be made to the way they are delivered. The tips highlighted in this guide will give colleges and their students every chance of success in their external assessments.



PLANNING

TIMETABLES

Firstly, it's important to plan learners' independent study time. Retaining information is vital for an externally-assessed unit, so focusing on relevant tasks in their own time will help significantly. Set online revision tasks, additional research with clear outcomes, and other related exercises.

Secondly, consider the time of day externally-assessed units are taught. If learners have had a whole morning of theory or practical, consider if there are any consequences for afternoon learning and activities. Heavy theoretical input on external units might, for example, take place in the morning, with practical-based internal modules in the afternoon.

PLANNING BACKWARDS

Programme managers should plan to deliver and meet the requirements of the external assessment date. Take the assessment date as a starting point; working backwards to establish when to run mocks, to give feedback and for learners to plan and revise. The revision and practice paper stages are critical. Planning in this way gives a finish point for delivering all unit content.

Give consideration to staff workloads around mock time. Students need individual feedback to help them identify how to improve, so ensure that time is available to undertake assessments and provide a quick turnaround for feedback i.e. don't schedule assessment submissions from other units at the same time—keep staff and students' workloads manageable.



GROUP SIZES

The financial strain in some Further Education colleges has increased the need to teach larger groups of students. A larger group can have advantages, for example creating more of a buzz around a project. However, when it comes to delivering an external assessment and ensuring students retain key information, smaller groups make the process more efficient. If group merging is essential, can it be saved just for internal or practical-based units? If group sizes are naturally large, can they be kept large when delivering projects and split for the external units? This enables greater reviewing of information and tracking of progress; essential for success of external assessments.

SCHEDULING AND SPREADING EXAM LOAD

There can be a tendency for colleges to book external assessments early in the course to ensure learners get as many retake opportunities as possible. Learners need time to build base levels of knowledge and skills, and also develop confidence. Spreading assessments over a whole study programme enables students to develop in their skills and approach external assessments when success is more likely.

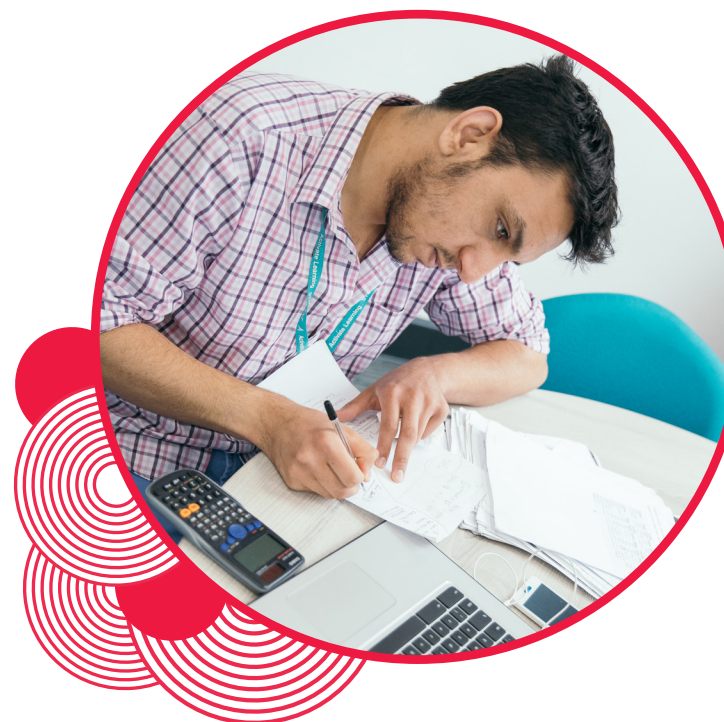
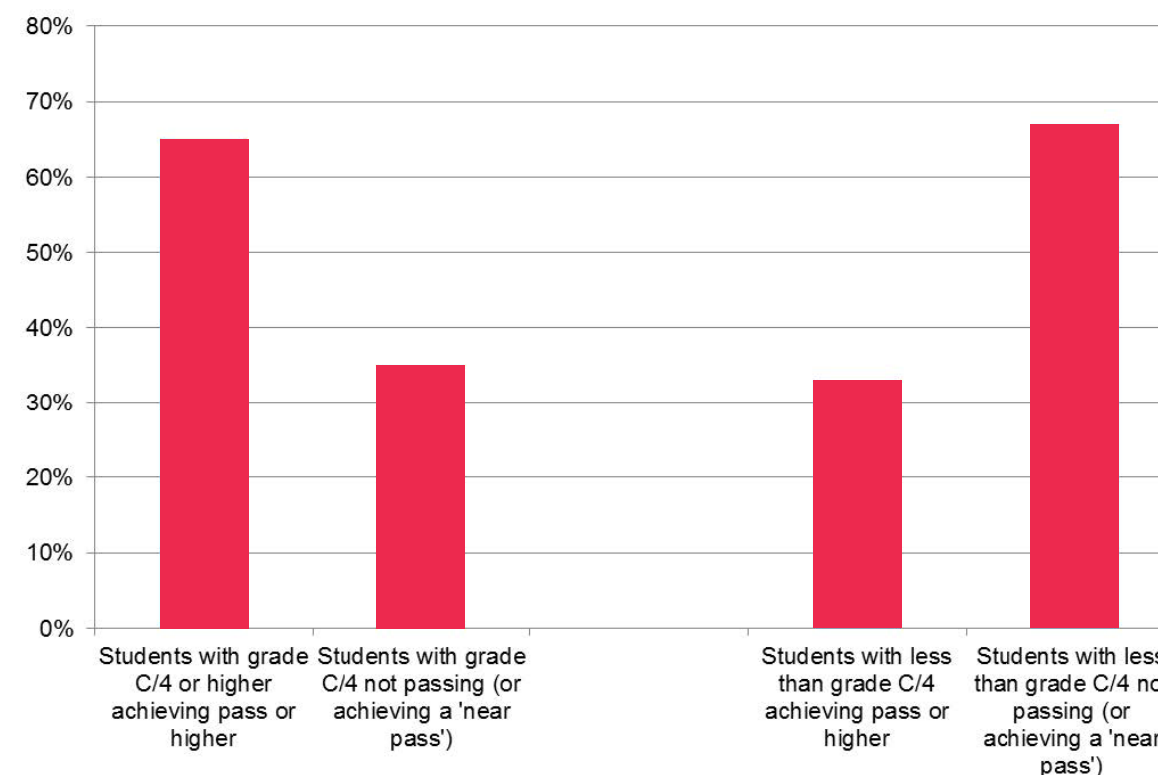
The first external assessment window has proven to be by far the least successful. Sitting one external assessment at this point, and one perhaps in June of the first year, works well. Overloading students with the stress of external assessments early in the course can decrease motivation and give them less chance of succeeding.

Often a qualification specification will give a clear indication of how to set the units out. For example, units required for a BTEC 'Foundation Diploma' 540 GLH version may be completed earlier, whereas those only required for an Extended Diploma (1080) are designed to be delivered later in the programme.

ENTRY CRITERIA

The graph below shows, at Activate Learning in 2017-18, the correlation between Level 3 learners with and without a grade 4 (C) or higher in English, and external assessment results. The need to give serious consideration to entry criteria is more critical than ever, and the need to prepare learners from a lower level thoroughly (if they are to progress) is also key.

In some FE colleges, Level 2 learners may progress on to a Level 3 programme without the higher level GCSE grades. Give strong consideration to what can be done to support them more and ensuring all learners are on a course on which they are capable of succeeding.



COGNITIVE LOADING

The need to spread external assessments is highlighted by the principle of 'cognitive loading', originally put forward by Educational Psychologist, John Sweller. Sweller highlights several key points:

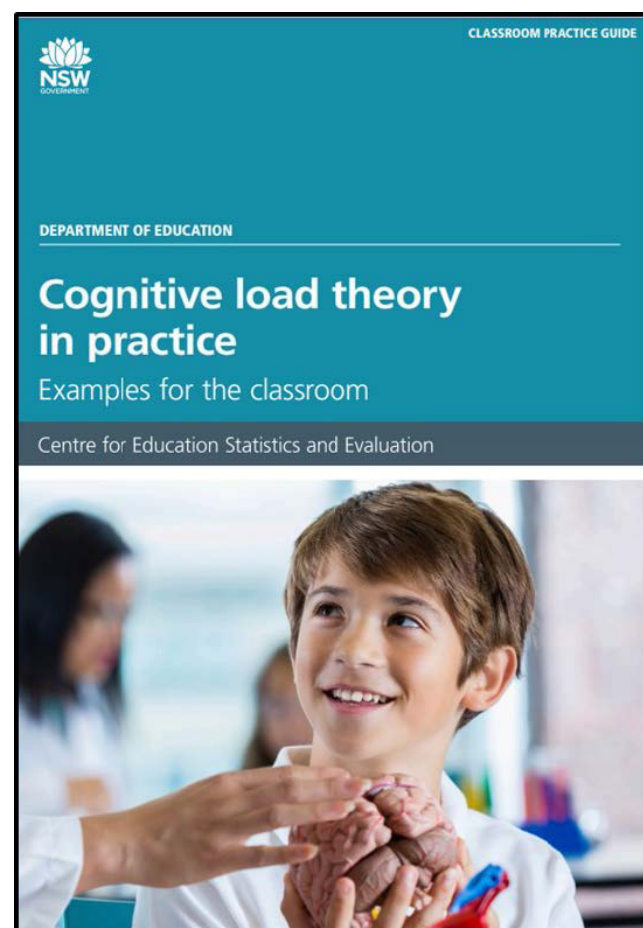
- When learning new information, it is important to reduce the load on students' working memories to help them retain it
- If our working memory gets overloaded, learning will slow down or even stop altogether
- Once information is stored in our memory, we can then challenge the knowledge with more complex problems in which to apply the knowledge

"The average person can only hold on to around seven chunks of new information in their working memory at a time, and can only work on about four chunks at a time...Learning can be slowed down or even stopped if our working memory is overloaded, such as when we have to process too much new information at once."

Page 2 of guide

In relation to external assessments this simply implies 'keep it simple'. If a student has two or three external assessments to revise for at once, they won't hold onto the key information as successfully as they could if they were focusing on one.

It also highlights the need to deliver what is in the specification and avoid unnecessary additional information. Teachers often have expertise which they share with students, going above and beyond what they have to cover in the specification. It might be useful, but it will increase the load being placed on the brain and prevent learners from retaining the critical information needed to succeed in their external assessment. It is far more effective, in this case, to spend the time working on tasks to consolidate key information in the specification, get it stored in students' long-term memory and then develop their ability to apply it in assessment situations.



DELIVERY AND SUPPORT

"EXTERNAL ASSESSMENTS" (NOT ALWAYS "EXAMS")

The word 'exam' conjures up negative memories and a fixed mindset for a lot of students. Many students in FE settings have chosen a vocational course to avoid exams. If told that they have an 'exam' they will approach it like an exam. However, most external assessments on technical/vocational programmes are vocationally-based tasks. For example, on the marketing unit of BTEC Level 3 Business, the requirement is to write a marketing campaign for a given scenario - just like one might have to undertake in real work. They have to consider timescales and budgets within the plan, just like in the real world, and they have to do it under time-pressure, just like in the real world.

So why tell learners that they have an 'exam' when in fact they have to complete a vocationally-relevant task? Refer to the task they have to undertake appropriately. If it is an exam, call it an exam. If it isn't, create the right mindset by giving it a more accurate title. Make sure your learners give more consideration to taking the appropriate approach to the assessment and don't emphasise the need for information when the assessment requires the application of skills.

Remember that all staff are responsible for learner success. Opportunities to build and practice the skills required for external assessments can also be provided by the teaching on the units which are not externally assessed.

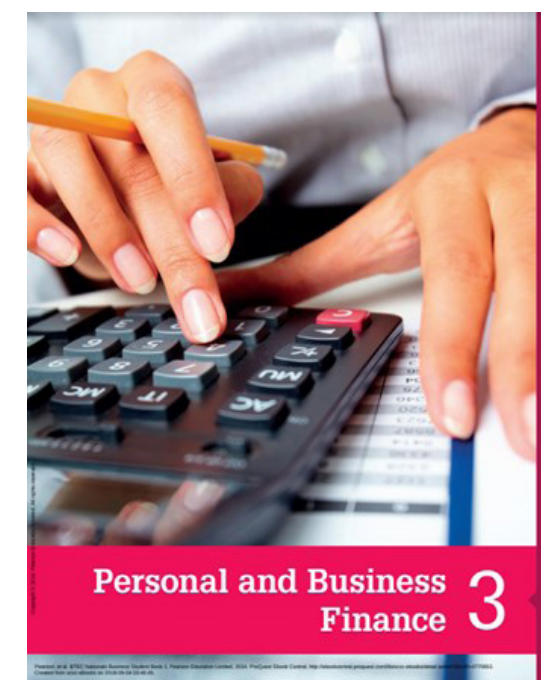
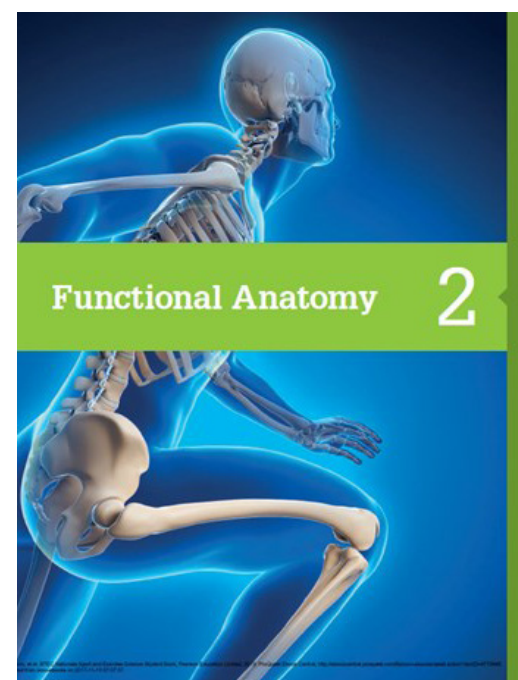
KEY TERMINOLOGY

The same key words will appear in the course specification as will appear in assessment papers, which will then also appear in the examiners' mark schemes. Learners need to know the key terminology. It is essential when they progress on to work in industry, and is also essential for success in the external assessments.

RESOURCES

Make sure learners have all the resources they require to complete tasks between lessons and revise. As highlighted previously, focus on delivering to the specification; textbooks which link to the unit will provide a great resource for students. Make sure they either have full access and/or know exactly where to get them.

Also consider online tasks and other resources to give students as many options as possible for revision and additional practice.



DELIVERY AND SUPPORT

REGULAR PRACTICE

Practice papers with feedback are critical. One of the key skills required for external assessment is interpreting a question and putting together a well-constructed answer (hence the direct link between English grades and success described on page 4).

As starter and plenary activities, give students assessment-style questions and short tasks, then go through model answers. The topic you cover in one lesson should be tested in the following lesson in the style of whatever kind of assessment the students have for your unit.

Towards the end of a lesson, rather than finish with any common plenary task or recap, spend the last 10-15 minutes working on questions with marks attached, to a strict timescale. After checking students' ability, give them a model answer - including what information should be covered and how it should be answered.



BUILDING UP TO ASSESSMENT TIME

ASSESSMENT TIMETABLE

Planning around the assessment date is key, especially in the build up to it. Usual timetables may need to be collapsed to allow additional revision and practice sessions. Learners may need to be in on a different day to normal for their assessment.

Plan this well in advance to optimise the time teachers have with learners. This is especially important when working around holidays. In a January exam series, the assessment dates are often in the first week back from Christmas when the students will have realistically switched off from college. June assessments may be shortly before or after GCSE exams. Plan around this to ensure that you maximise focus in the run up to the assessment., for example giving them an extra day to revise and practice.

FEEDBACK AND TRACKING

Teachers should ensure that they don't provide students with practice papers without offering assessment and individual feedback. Simply going through an example of a good answer will not have the same impact. Individual feedback is critical. Help students to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and to see how they have answered questions in a successful or unsuccessful way. This will also enable teachers to see where the common student issues are, which can then be worked on in full group lesson time. Identified proficient students may also become a useful learning tool in lessons.

Ensure that mock assessments are done well before the assessment date to give enough time to reflect on feedback, identify areas for improvement and act on them.

REVISION RESOURCES, TIPS AND ACTIVITIES

Teachers may tell their students to 'make sure they revise', but there is a need to ensure that they are able to do so effectively.

Some strategies you could consider are:

- Setting specific tasks with deadlines (possibly online)
- Enabling students access to revision guides, which are full of tasks and key information
- Liaising with parents to suggest tasks to do at home
- Reviewing student revision plans
- Complete revision activities in class to enable students to establish and develop their preferred revision techniques



IN BRIEF: PLANNING AND DELIVERING FOR EXTERNAL ASSESSMENTS

STAGE 1: SCHEDULE THE COURSE TO MAXIMISE CHANCES OF SUCCESS

- Is the load of external assessments spread over the programme?
- Has the NQF specification been checked as an indicator of the units to cover earlier or later??
- Will students have a fair opportunity to build skills and base knowledge?

STAGE 2: TIMETABLES

- Are externally-assessed units being taught at a suitable time for students to retain key information?
- Are there activities to be completed in independent study time?
- Are group sizes on external units appropriate?

STAGE 3: RIGHT STUDENT, RIGHT COURSE

- Do all learners meet the strict entry criteria?
- If not, do you have confidence that they will all be capable of performing well in an external assessment? If not, what additional support has been offered?

STAGE 4: PLANNING

- Is there enough time, as you approach the assessment, for effective revision, mock practice papers and feedback?

STAGE 5: RELEVANT AND ENGAGING RESOURCES

- Are staff and the learners prepared with resources relevant to the specification?

STAGE 6: SMART DELIVERY

- Are staff following the specification—no unnecessary additional information, but not missing anything out?
- Are you always using key terminology from the specification (and therefore the mark scheme)?

STAGE 7: REGULAR PRACTICE

- Do learners have regular practice opportunities in class, with tasks similar to those in the relevant external assessment?
- Are you using model answers to highlight how to approach such tasks?

STAGE 8: PRACTICE PAPERS AND FEEDBACK

- Have staff got a supply of past papers, with mark schemes, to use in class?
- Are you giving your learners individual feedback on their papers, as well as highlighting key themes to the group?

STAGE 9: REVISION

- Do the learners know how to revise effectively?
- Have they got the right resources to help them revise effectively?
- How will you test their revision effectiveness?

STAGE 10: ASSESSMENT TIMETABLE

- Do all students know the date of the assessment with plenty of notice?
- Are there any distractions in the build up to the assessment which need to be considered?
- Are you collapsing the usual timetable to maximise revision and practice time?

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Note that all information is correct at time of writing, December 2018.

What happens if a student fails an external assessment (BTEC)?

The rules for BTEC external assessment grades are:

- If a learner fails an assessment on a core unit they are unable to achieve their qualification
- However, there are two resit opportunities for each external assessment (three attempts in total). These resits can only be taken as part of a standard exam series (i.e. January or May/June when they are sat nationwide)
- There is also a 'near pass grade' available for learners falling slightly below the pass mark which enables learners to potentially still pass their overall qualification

What does the 'N' grade mean?

The mark required for a 'near pass' grade sits halfway between zero and the pass mark (e.g. if the pass mark is 20, the mark required for a near pass would be 10). A student achieving this grade can still pass their qualification overall, but would need to bring up their overall points score with higher marks in other units.

How can I access suitable resources to support the delivery of these units?

For Activate Learning staff, course handbooks are available through the online library, and accessible via the Staff Portal (Quick links—library—library catalogue). Failing that, speak to your library staff who can assist you in finding them, or ordering them if required.

For BTEC-based resources go onto **www.qualifications.pearson.com** and search for the relevant qualification. It will provide a range of suitable resources for your course.

What additional support is available for BTEC NQF delivery?

There are numerous training sessions available. In the case of large numbers of staff, BTEC will sometimes send a trainer to you. Alternatively, there are regular training events both face-to-face and online. Again, visit **www.qualifications.pearson.com** and select 'training' to find out more.

Do I have the choice of when to deliver the external units, and how long I deliver them for?

Yes. You decide which exam series you wish to enter your students in for.

However, you should consider which units are mandatory for different levels of qualification. If you have any students doing a Foundation Diploma rather than the full Extended Diploma and only staying for a year, they would need to have done the modules required for that qualification in that year.

How can I find past papers for practice?

There are a couple of options:

Exam Wizard (**www.examwizard.co.uk**) has a large bank of past papers with which you can build your own papers.

In addition, going via **www.qualifications.pearson.com** will enable you to access past papers relevant to your subject area.

Why deliver an externally-based course? Why not just find a different course at the same level which is internally assessed?

A lot of vocational courses are moving towards external assessments. In many cases, they are more recognised by universities (e.g. on some courses, BTEC NQF courses are accepted as entry criteria whereas BTEC QCF courses are not accepted). Completing external assessments, in many people's eyes, gives more credibility to the student's achievement.

Moving to a new NQF course generally means moving to a more up-to-date, robust qualification which raises the overall standards of the delivery.

Ultimately, use a course which is right for your students, but avoid being put off purely on the grounds of it being externally-assessed.



USEFUL LINKS

GUIDE TO COGNITIVE LOAD THEORY:

[www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/
Cognitive_load_theory_practice_guide_AA.pdf](http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/Cognitive_load_theory_practice_guide_AA.pdf)

FOR TRAINING SUPPORT FROM PEARSON / BTEC:

www.qualifications.pearson.com/en/support/support-topics/exams/pastpapers.html

FOR PAST PAPERS:

www.examwizard.co.uk

www.qualifications.pearson.com/en/support/support-topics/exams/pastpapers.html

FOR INFORMATION ON GRADES FROM EXTERNAL ASSESSMENTS:

[www.qualifications.pearson.com/en/support/support-topics/resultscertification/
understanding-marks-and-grades/calculating-your-overall-btecgrade.html](http://www.qualifications.pearson.com/en/support/support-topics/resultscertification/understanding-marks-and-grades/calculating-your-overall-btecgrade.html)

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