Assessing Large Classes

Centre for Innovation in Education

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Background

Large classes exist in higher education due to a combination of increasing student enrolment and economic pressures on the higher education sector (Molavi, 2024). Significant drivers of this are the massification and marketisation of higher education, which refers to the substantial global increase in access to and enrolment in higher education (Lawrence, 2022) where principles of supply and demand influence the operation of universities (Sweeney, 2019).

Limited availability of teaching staff relative to the growing student population is another key factor (Lawrence, 2022). Despite increased student enrolment, the number of university staff has remained relatively stable, naturally leading to larger classes (Molavi, 2024). Budgetary pressures and the need for cost-effectiveness compel many higher education institutions to accommodate more students in each class, where larger classes can be seen as an economically viable way to manage resources, especially in times of financial constraints and decreased or stagnating government funding. Furthermore, some departments experience rapid expansion through increased student numbers or the sharing of introductory courses, leading to a greater number of students needing to be taught within a class (Sweeney, 2019).

This guide aims to offer advice to staff who find themselves needing to assess a large class. The challenges of assessing large classes are simply amplifications of the challenges felt for any class (Lawrence, 2022), and include (i) dealing with student questions on assessment, (ii) generating and distributing feedback to students, (iii) managing a marking workload, and (iv) managing reasonable adjustments relating to assessment. Increased numbers of students can cause problems if the workload falls on a small number of staff or is spread across many; in both cases standardisation of responses and marking consistently will be difficult (Chetwynd and Dobbyn, 2012). When considering if the advice described here is relevant to your class, it is worth noting that there is no formal definition of 'large' for class size, and instead staff should consider if the size of the class results in a "…workload higher than normal because of the number of students enrolled" (Wadesango, 2021). The advice builds on general good practice and links to other CIE resources are signposted where appropriate.

Strategies to consider

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Strategies to consider

1. **Clearly define and communicate the assessment expectations** at the start of the course and make the information available online (Damodaran, 2016). This includes specifying the types of assessments (e.g., quizzes, exams, projects), their coverage, weighting, and any permitted materials. Staff should also consider outlining the marking criteria they will use (consider using rubrics as discussed below). Clearly communicating marking strategies can prevent an overwhelming number of questions about grades and feedback later in the course. Also, develop a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about assessment and consider using online forums where students can answer each other's questions to reduce the volume of individual inquiries (UNSW, n.d.).

    Related CIE Resources:
    [Assessment Module Handbook Template](#)
    [Canvas course principles](#)

2. **Introduce group work** where practical and appropriate. Arranging students into groups promotes peer-learning which may reduce the number of queries directed towards staff. Staff should provide adequate guidelines and procedures to help groups self-facilitate with minimal instructor input (UNSW, n.d.). While managing group work in large classes can be challenging, it can reduce marking time and develop important graduate capabilities.

    Related CIE Resources:
    [Designing peer learning groups and activities](#)
    [Approaches for using peer review for evaluation of groupwork on large cohort modules](#)
    [Multi-cultural group work](#)

3. **Leverage technology** to manage assessment tasks and provide feedback efficiently (UNSW, n.d.). This can include computer-marked quizzes for regular feedback, online annotation for marking, audio feedback, and Canvas for managing group work and communication. Use the dedicated group assignment features of Canvas to streamline the process of group coursework submission and marking. Also, consider how technology could be used within classes to provide efficient formative feedback, for example through using polling tools during class to get immediate feedback on student understanding.

    Related CIE Resources:
    [Polling and interaction tools for teaching](#)
    [Creating groups in Canvas](#)
    [SpeedGrader in Canvas](#)
    [Buddycheck Peer evaluation](#)

    Also see:
    [Creating a Group Assignment](#)

4. **Explore incorporating self-assessment and peer-assessment** activities where feasible (UNSW, n.d.). This can reduce the marking workload for teaching staff and encourage students to engage with the assessment criteria. Students can learn from the process of providing feedback on the work of others as well as from any feedback they receive.

   Related CIE Resources:
   Designing peer learning groups and activities
   Peer evaluation
   Peer evaluation of group work case study 1 and case study 2

   Also see:
   How to set up Peer Review in Canvas

5. **Review how your curriculum and assessments are organised.** A long list of discrete topics can be difficult to assess but a coherent story linked to the learning outcomes of the course can make an assessment simpler to design and mark (Damodaran, 2016). Students also need time to reflect on feedback and their progress towards meeting the learning outcomes (Cooner, 2010). Overall, having a well-designed assessment strategy, along with a schedule of marking and feedback timings, are crucial to balancing the workload associated with large classes. Consider also incorporating formative assessment elements within summative assessments (Broadbent et al, 2018) where assessments are designed so that students can use feedback formatively on future submissions. This can provide valuable feedback to students for improvement without necessarily increasing the grading workload significantly, assisting with the prioritisation of timely feedback which can be more challenging in large classes (Damodaran, 2016). Combining assessment tasks and learning activities rather than treating them as separate add-ons also make the workload more manageable for students (UNSW, n.d.). Broadbent et al (2018) provided feedback on journal submissions through 3 methods, all of which delivered benefits when working with large student numbers:

   1. **Utilisation of rubrics to develop clear assessment criteria.** Rubrics not only promote consistency among markers but also inform students about expected performance standards, supporting self-assessment. Rubrics can also speed up the marking process and enhance reliability across different markers.
   2. **Use of exemplars** (illustrations of good work). These can help students understand what constitutes quality work and the criteria for judging it. Annotated online exemplars (where staff demonstrate how the marking criteria can be applied to the exemplar) can be particularly effective for large classes to ensure consistent understanding.
   3. **Audio feedback.** This can act as a potentially more time-efficient alternative to written feedback. It can also be more personalised and helpful for markers' consistency when used for moderation.

Related CIE Resources:

Assessment and Feedback Toolkit

Teaching students to work with feedback and rubrics

What are rubrics?

6. Design assessments inclusively to minimise the need for reasonable adjustments. This can help students personalise assessments to their needs without additional support, creating a more manageable marking process for staff, minimising the need for bespoke reasonable adjustments, and supporting an accessible assessment environment for all students (Equality Act, 2010). Through the use of flexible assessment, aim to give students choice of how they can best demonstrate their learning, ideally using the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principle of 'Multiple Means of Expression'

Related CIE resources

Designing Inclusive and Accessible Assessments

Flexible assessment guidance

Calculating student workload and equivalencies

See also

University of Liverpool flexible assessment policy

Alternatives to the essay can be inclusive and authentic

Conclusion

The success of including any of these strategies into your course will be context dependent, and strategies that work for one course may not elsewhere. Therefore, it is important to consider the specific needs and limitations of the staff and students involved on the course when adapting your assessment strategies. For more information or bespoke assistance with your specific assessment queries, please contact the Centre for Innovation in Education.

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