



UNIVERSITY OF  
**OXFORD**

**EDUCATION COMMITTEE**  
**POLICY AND GUIDANCE ON**  
**UNDERGRADUATE LEARNING AND TEACHING**

**2008**

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# Foreword

Oxford is proud of the system of full-time undergraduate education it offers, and of the partnership between colleges and faculties/departments. This consolidated statement of Policy and Guidance on Undergraduate Learning and Teaching acknowledges that while colleges provide extensive materials of their own setting out college policies and requirements, faculties and departments share responsibility for major aspects of policy and provision for undergraduate learning and teaching. The Education Committee concluded that a consolidated account of University expectations, regularly updated, would be a valuable reference for all those concerned with undergraduate learning and teaching, whether in colleges or in faculties/departments.

It hopes that this collation of material which is often scattered through policy documents and handbooks will be of particular value for:

- Senior Tutors and Tutorial Committees in colleges
- Directors of Undergraduate Studies (or their equivalents) and Academic Committees in faculties/departments
- Divisional Academic Committees

In line with all the statements of Policy and Guidance, specific Education Committee policy is set out in the italicised sections. As with the other policy and guidance statements produced by the Education Committee, there will be a regular process of revision. This is undertaken in response to comments from external examiners, from the Proctors, from officers in divisions, faculties/departments and colleges, and as a result of national developments. All such comments are extremely welcome, and should be sent to [richard.hughes@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:richard.hughes@admin.ox.ac.uk).

# 1. Overall expectations

1.1 The University is expressly committed to providing ‘an exceptional education for both undergraduates and graduates, characterised by the close contact of students with distinguished scholars in supportive collegiate and departmental communities’<sup>1</sup>. This is reiterated at a number of points in the Strategic Plan:

‘The Collegiate University is distinctive in the high level of engagement of senior research-active academics both in the tutorial teaching of undergraduates and in the teaching and supervision of graduates. We will sustain this feature of the education offered by the Collegiate University.’<sup>2</sup>

‘The tutorial system has given Oxford its worldwide reputation for teaching at undergraduate level and is strongly valued by students and teachers alike.’<sup>3</sup>

1.2 The University stresses the individual character of this education. In describing the environment that the collegiate University seeks to provide for its students, the emphasis is on a flexible framework within which each student is enabled – to varying degrees and always under guidance – ‘to plot their own individual learning route’.<sup>4</sup> The student is considered to be an adult participant in the pursuit of his or her academic development, operating within a context where highly intelligent students can take a measure of responsibility for developing both their own intellectual powers and for demonstrating them in highly structured assessment.

1.3 Material produced by faculties/departments and colleges therefore attaches particular importance to:

How a student’s personal intellectual formation and study paths are underpinned by the individual attention possible through the tutorial system;

The collegiate context for the student’s study, e.g. ‘Our collegiate system enables undergraduates, graduates and academics to belong to small scholarly communities, whilst at the same time benefiting from the international research strengths of the departments and faculties.’<sup>5</sup>

Learning directed by those actively involved in research and scholarship.

*1.4 The Education Committee asks all responsible bodies to bear these overall expectations in mind in formulating proposals for the development of course content and structures for undergraduate programmes.*

<sup>1</sup> Strategic Plan, 2008-9 to 2012-13, objective 2, paragraph 7

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, paragraph 28

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, paragraph 33

<sup>4</sup> Self Evaluation Document for the QAA Institutional Audit (2004) – para 116

<sup>5</sup> Strategic Plan, paragraph 178

## 2. Induction and Study skills

### Induction

2.1 It is widely accepted that all students, however able, require initial guidance to take maximum advantage of the academic opportunities open to them as speedily as possible. The majority of students will need to acquire or develop further essential study skills. They may also need help to become accustomed to their new working and social environments. Access and widening participation initiatives are incomplete if they are not followed up by appropriate induction and continuing support. In most subject areas, the University regards the work done by colleges, college tutors and college support staff as the principal means of enabling students to engage with the academic and social opportunities open to them.

2.2 The University also welcomes the growing range of introductory and longer-term information that faculties/departments provide through their handbooks and websites. In addition to the areas where they have traditionally provided induction, e.g. health and safety, practical training, library and computing provision, faculties/departments have themselves begun to cater for some specific aspects of induction where there is agreement that they are best placed to do so. This will normally include initial guidance on examinations but might also include information on, for example, getting the most out of lectures, best practice in note-taking, and guidance on the relationship between lectures, classes and tutorials. Perhaps the most important University contribution to academic induction is its extensive guidance on developing academic good practice and the avoidance of plagiarism (see: [http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/the Education Committee/plagiarism](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/the_Education_Committee/plagiarism)). The University regards this as an area to which colleges, faculties and departments must also give priority.

2.3 *Induction should enable students to begin their studies with an awareness of the academic and social environment within which they will be working, the main skills which they will require for their particular degree course, and appropriate information about sources of support and advice. All student handbooks should contain clear statements on academic good practice and the avoidance of plagiarism, in line with the University's guidance.*

### Study skills

2.4 Much of what is normally understood by generic 'undergraduate study skills needs' is, in Oxford, a normal part of tutorial teaching, which seeks to develop and refine students' abilities in written and oral communication, i.e. essay writing, problem-solving, argumentation, use of language, as well as develop course-specific skills. The tutorial framework allows teachers to adapt the presentation of the subject to take account of a student's aptitudes and prior experience. Tutorial feedback and discussion as well as frequent formative assessment will then address the problems individual students may experience in practice (see 3.14 for a typical description provided by a department). College teaching plays a key role in supporting the development of a wide range of study skills.

2.5 However, there is also growing recognition of the need for both colleges and faculties/departments to supplement and enhance the provision for undergraduate study

skills embodied in the tutorial. This is largely in response to changing student needs, and is well summed up in the Teaching Guide for new staff in History:

Our students come to us from a variety of different backgrounds and institutions. All have shown potential at the admissions stage, but they have not all developed the study skills needed to cope with and profit from our courses. The Faculty provides introductory lectures, focusing particularly on lectures, note-taking and essay-writing, but it is expected that college tutors will help their students to acquire the necessary skills - both by general advice at induction, and also by observation and tailored comment in tutorials.

2.6 On top of these skills are the various initial subject-specific skills necessary to acquire knowledge, understanding and competence in a particular area of study<sup>6</sup>. These will also be addressed in a variety of ways involving colleges, faculties/departments, and students themselves. In addition to the capacities which are developed and refined within the tutorial system, individual faculties and departments recognise that sub-sets of students may have particular areas for preliminary reinforcement or development as prerequisites for studying their chosen discipline at university level, e.g. pre-sessional classes in Modern Languages, early sessions for students in the Sciences without particular 'A' levels, e.g. Maths or Further Maths. In all courses, students will need training in specific skills associated with the study of the discipline, and with developing a range of competencies. Associated with these skills are an increasingly varied range of assessment methods which arise from the need to augment the traditional written examination with other types and styles of assessment to reflect and test a range of intellectual talents and competencies.<sup>7</sup>

2.7 A final tier of provision is the specialised provision available within the collegiate University which may contribute to the development of appropriate study skills, or enable individual students to reach their full potential. These include procedures to help students with a range of special educational needs, the mechanisms by which the University approves consequential adjustments and a range of central support services, including the Counselling Service (<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/shw/counsersv.shtml>) and the Disability Office(<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/eop/disab/students.shtml>). Other central services include:

Careers (see <http://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/>);

Computing (via the Oxford University Computing Service, see <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/>);

Language skills (via the Language Centre, see <http://www.lang.ox.ac.uk/>);

Information and library skills (see [http://www.ouls.ox.ac.uk/information\\_skills](http://www.ouls.ox.ac.uk/information_skills)).

*2.7 Information provided for undergraduate students should help them to identify the significant induction and study skills support available from colleges, faculties and departments, and central support services. It should make them aware of the different types of study skills and subject-specific skills that they will need to develop across the duration of their course. Particular importance is attached to ensuring that students are made fully aware of the range of support services which are available to them.*

<sup>6</sup> Learning outcomes based on knowledge, understanding and competencies are normally set out either in Programme Specifications or in Handbooks.

<sup>7</sup> Self Evaluation Document for the QAA Institutional Audit (2004) – para 19

## Handbooks

2.8 The widespread availability of course handbooks is welcomed. In recent work on study skills/learning development undertaken by the Learning Institute on behalf of the Education Committee, it was suggested that:

- the utility of handbooks would be enhanced if there were a degree of standardisation in content and presentation;
- the structure of some handbooks could be improved to make it easier to locate specific pieces of information;
- handbooks should as far as possible be available on unrestricted web sites.

Given the importance of handbooks (both in hard copy and in electronic form on websites) as sources of information for undergraduate students -:

*the Education Committee considers that all undergraduate handbooks should include:*

*University guidance on academic good practice and avoidance of plagiarism*

*A description of the faculty/department's understanding of the role of tutorials*

*A statement of the agreed teaching norms for each undergraduate course, setting out the amounts of teaching of different types to be provided*

*A description of the academic year and the expectations relating to vacations*

*The Faculty/department version of the University's Complaints and Appeals Template*

*and in FHS Handbooks - specified elements relating to assessment methods (see annexe)*

1. *Qualitative descriptors for each classification level*
2. *The University's standardised expression of agreed final marks*
3. *The use of independent double marking or agreed alternatives*
4. *The weight given to each paper*
5. *Classification conventions*

*The Education Committee also asks those responsible for the publication and revision of handbooks to give particular attention to ensuring that information provided in handbooks and on websites is up-to-date and accurate, and is in line with the latest regulations applicable to the course.*

### **3. Tutorials and Tutorial teaching**

#### **The commitment**

3.1 The University is unequivocal about its commitment to the centrality of the tutorial method: ‘The tutorial system has given Oxford its worldwide reputation for teaching at undergraduate level and is strongly valued by students and teachers alike.’<sup>8</sup>

3.2 The Strategic Plan sets this out in some detail:

College tutors are closely involved in the progress of each of their undergraduates throughout the whole of their period in Oxford, and support and foster their intellectual and personal development. The regular oral and written feedback on which tutorials are built provides students with invaluable opportunities for formative assessment and for development of the synoptic elements of their course, within the continuity of the tutorial relationship.<sup>9</sup>

3.3 Tutorials take different forms according to the discipline concerned and to the particular needs of individual students and groups of students. While practice varies between subjects, the close working relationship enables tutors to help students tackle problems and understand new material.

#### **Numbers of tutorials**

*3.4 The centrality of the tutorial has to be reflected in the provision which is made for undergraduates in all courses. Unless alternative arrangements are justified (and approved) on pedagogical grounds, all courses should contain a substantial tutorial element, to reflect the tutorial norms approved by the Education Committee, following proposals made by the faculty or department concerned and their consideration by the Senior Tutors Committee. At least half the tutorials received by a student should be given by a senior member of the academic staff.*<sup>10</sup>

#### **Range of teaching methods**

3.5 The University is clear that a firm commitment to tutorial teaching does not preclude the use of a rich range of other teaching methods. The Strategic Plan provided reasons why continued development is appropriate:

It is also recognised that the skills learned in tutorials need to be complemented by skills such as collaboration and teamwork which may best be fostered in other pedagogical settings. The balance of lectures, tutorials, and classes or seminars, and laboratory or fieldwork within each programme needs to be carefully considered by

<sup>8</sup> Strategic Plan, paragraph 33

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, paragraph 33

<sup>10</sup> The Education Committee takes this term to encompass senior academic staff, i.e. those holding joint appointments, those appointed to teach by colleges, and those senior research staff teaching on behalf of a college, faculty or department.

the individual departments and faculties, and the desirability of not overloading either students or research-active academic staff taken into account.<sup>11</sup>

3.6 The careful changes to the balance of pedagogic methods which continues to take place in undergraduate programmes reflects this thinking. It also continues the pattern of development over many years, as faculties and departments have monitored, reviewed and reworked their programmes.

3.7 All responsible bodies are already asked to publish norms for each undergraduate programme setting out the amounts of teaching of different types to be provided. This information should be widely and readily available. The Education Committee considers it important to be in a position to monitor this, and to ensure that any revised balance continues to maintain the central position of the tutorial.

*3.8 All those bodies responsible for an undergraduate programme must publish norms for that programme – and these should be readily available to staff and students. The balance of lectures, tutorials, and classes or seminars, and laboratory or fieldwork within each programme should be carefully and regularly considered by departments and faculties*

### **Expectations of a tutorial - feedback**

3.9 Subject handbooks contain extensive but varied guidance as to the appropriate expectations of tutorials on the part of both students and academic staff. The University has been reluctant to propose an all-encompassing definition since it recognises the variations dictated by disciplinary differences. However three general aspects of tutorials can be emphasised: first, the various forms of feedback, second, the importance of regular reporting, and, third, promoting students' understanding of the purpose of the tutorial.

3.10 The scale and extent of feedback provided through tutorial teaching is a core element of the collegiate University's learning support for undergraduates. Tutorial teaching provides regular and substantial feedback and formative assessment, although it is acknowledged that the precise form will vary from one subject to another, and from tutor to tutor. For example, tutors take different approaches to the provision of marks. Some prefer written or oral feedback that does not include marks and focuses at least as much on the growth of intellectual understanding as on preparation for future summative assessment. Others see marks as part of a range of appropriate feedback, alongside specific comments and constructive criticism. In relation to quantitative work, where there may be 'correct answers' marks have an obvious specific value. Many students find marks useful as an indicator of how well they have done on a particular piece of work, an encouragement to develop further, and especially useful in the run-up to exams. What is of most significance is that tutors explain, and students understand, the individual approaches taken.

### **Expectations of a tutorial - regular reporting**

3.8 The University and the colleges see the provision of termly reports as an invaluable aspect of feedback for both students and their colleges. It welcomes the recent work (facilitated by OxCORT) on improving student access to reports undertaken by the Senior Tutors' Committee and endorses the significance attached to the provision, monitoring and

<sup>11</sup> Strategic Plan, paragraph 34

discussion of reports reflected in the Conference of Colleges' Notes of Guidance for College Reports on Undergraduate and Postgraduate Academic Provision, and especially their individual discussion at termly reviews or 'collections'.

3.9 Feedback to the student's college from those providing the tutorials is likely to be of even greater importance where tutorials are set up by a faculty/department and are outside the immediate purview of the college. In such circumstances, faculties and departments should expect colleges to place a high premium on receiving reports in the normal way, and especially where there is any cause for concern. In addition, the students involved may be less clear where they should take concerns with any aspects of the tutorial provision organised by the faculty/department. This should be made plain in all faculty/department literature, and is clearly facilitated by the appointment in almost all faculties/departments of a Director of Undergraduate Studies (or equivalent officer).

3.10 However the teaching is organised, tutorial feedback should be seen as a key characteristic of tutorial teaching and a routine expectation.

### **Purposes of the tutorial**

3.11 In the report 'Undergraduate Experience of Learning at the University of Oxford' prepared by the Learning Institute, Dr Trigwell and Dr Ashwin explored a range of *student perceptions* of the tutorial and characterised them in a number of ways:

- (i) Tutorials as the tutor explaining to the student what the student does not understand;
- (ii) Tutorials as the tutor showing the student how to see the subject in the way that the tutor does;
- (iii) Tutorials as the tutor bringing aspects of the topic into relation to each other to help the student develop a new perspective in the wider context of the discipline;
- (iv) Tutorials as the tutor and the student exchanging different points of view and both coming to a new understanding.

3.12 In the course of its discussion of these findings, the Education Committee and its undergraduate panel acknowledged the different viewpoints but attached most weight to points three and four, seeing them as the most positive outcomes of the tutorial approach. But it also recognised that an important function of tutorials in the sciences was to develop students' abilities to solve unseen problems and to interpret scientific results and observations. In the light of these points the panel summarised the purpose of the tutorial in the following terms.

To develop an individual student's capacity to think in depth about a subject area, and to operate with growing confidence within its techniques and methodologies, with the expectation that the process will promote increased understanding of the discipline for both tutor and student.

3.13 Without diminishing the importance of tutorial preparation for exams, tutorials that are largely examination-orientated or seen as a substitute for lectures or for revision classes have a somewhat different purpose, especially as a system of termly collections is used to provide a regular means of preparation for examination performance.

3.14 While acknowledging the legitimate variation in approach between tutor and tutor, and between subject and subject, discipline-specific statements about the purpose of tutorial teaching already found in many course handbooks (to supplement the general guidance in

college handbooks) provide important guidance for both staff and students. In different ways, the three examples (below) reinforce the general understanding set out above.

### ***Earth Sciences***

Tutorials provide a flexible forum for small-group teaching. A principal function of tutorials is to allow exploration of a subject beyond the confines set in lectures or by the examinations and this can be tailored to the specific interests of the students and the tutor. A tutorial also allows a tutor to monitor closely students' academic progress and hence provide appropriate advice for their further academic development. Work set in tutorials can be in a variety of styles. Common modes are: tutorial essays; hand specimen interpretation; problem sets; focussed map interpretation; oral presentations (individual or team work). Tutors will often be happy to modify the work set to suit a particular tutorial group, especially in the later years of study.

### ***History***

Tutors' approaches to the conduct of tutorials will vary to some degree. What can be said is that the tutorial is not primarily about the learning of facts and the provision of information about a subject. It is assumed that a capable and committed student will have used the pre-tutorial period of reading, attendance at lectures, preparation and writing to acquire a factual knowledge of the historical issues and the principal lines of historiographical debate about them.....It is from this base of assumed knowledge that the tutorial aims to explore the topic and its issues in greater depth. The objectives are both to foster in the students the ability to think critically (allowing them to interact with the tutor about the significance and appropriate interpretation of the material studied), and for the tutor to be assured that each student has a thorough and well-grounded understanding of the various issues and of the connections between them, both on the level of theoretical principle and in more immediate and concrete instances. A key aim is to develop flexibility and argumentative subtlety in the student by challenging initial ideas and approaches, pushing for responses to criticisms and alternative approaches, and encouraging depth and coherence in defending or expounding interpretations.

### ***PPE***

What you are expected to bring to a tutorial is knowledge of the reading that was set for it .... and any written work demanded. What you have the right to expect is your tutor's presence and scholarly attention throughout the hour agreed, plus guidance, e.g. a reading list, for next time. Beyond that, styles differ, depending on how many students are sharing the tutorial, the nature of the topic, and above all the habits and personality of your tutor. You must not expect uniformity, and you will gain most if you succeed in adapting to differences.....Remember that tutorials are not designed as a substitute for lectures, or for accumulating information, but to develop coherent verbal arguments and the capacity to think on one's feet, and to tackle specific difficulties and misunderstandings.

3.15 The Education Committee welcomes such statements and asks all responsible bodies to include a statement of this kind (taking account of the formulation in 3.12 above) in the relevant undergraduate handbook.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The corresponding recommendation in the Conference of Colleges' guidance to colleges states:

All colleges should explain the nature and purpose of tutorials to both students and new tutors in some easily accessible form. It is essential that the aim of tutorials is understood by tutors and students i.e. students are expected to produce work, with appropriate guidance, so that the work can be discussed with the tutor, and possibly other tutees at the tutorial in a way that maximises the learning experience for the student(s) concerned. This is a hallmark of and one of the most significant benefits of an Oxford undergraduate education. It is desirable that attention is drawn to such information in introductory literature and/or on the College's website so students can have an opportunity to acquaint themselves with this before starting their study in Oxford.

## 4. Lectures and classes

### Links between different types of teaching

4.1 The greater use of class teaching – whether on an inter-collegiate basis, organised by a faculty/department, or provided within an individual college – has introduced an additional component to the existing pattern of tutorials, practicals and lectures. Just as the appropriate relationship between tutorials and lectures has long been subject to scrutiny, the class/lecture/tutorial relationship is now of similar importance. For a number of subjects – particularly, but not exclusively, in the Sciences – the growing provision of tutorial material by faculties and departments has meant the development of a very much more direct relationship between classes, lectures and tutorials.

4.2 In turn this places considerable weight on the appropriate alignment of what students receive from tutorials, lectures and classes. The relationship has been a longstanding concern of external reviewers and auditors who have sought to identify faculty/department measures to ensure the coherence of tutorials (as largely college-based) and lectures and classes (as largely faculty/department-based). There have been welcome attempts to make the linkages clear in handbooks and on websites.

4.3 For students, the focus of their interest has usually been very practical, primarily focused on the timetabling of tutorials and the related lecture courses. For logistical reasons, especially the availability of specialized teaching, it may be impossible for lectures and related tutorials to coincide for all students. Faculties/departments acknowledge the concern and make any adjustments possible, but they also point out that a lecture course which comes after tutorial preparation and reinforces and develops initial learning can be very effective. A second area of interest relates specifically to the provision of classes as part of a mix of teaching provision including tutorials, lectures and classes. Faculties/departments have undertaken considerable work to explain the reasons for introducing a more varied pattern of tutorials, lectures and classes, and, in particular, to enable students and staff to understand and adapt to the different approaches of learning that they embody.

4.4 The University recognises the various boundaries involved in these developments.

It is widely recognised that the alignment of faculty/departmental and college provision is a significant matter on which the Education Committee believes subject areas should give guidance but that it is not a matter for central direction or legislation. The value of a proper autonomy for tutorial provision is an important aspect of learning and teaching within the collegiate University, and essentially reflects the recognition that within a clearly defined syllabus and with due recognition of the essential elements of the course, there should be scope for the tutor to adjust the learning experience to the individual needs of highly able and committed students.<sup>13</sup>

4.5 *Faculties/departments should provide clear guidance to students as to the relationship between tutorials, classes and lectures, how this is intended to support their learning, and how they can best take advantage of the combination offered. This may well be supplemented by material from individual colleges and will quite properly be interpreted*

<sup>13</sup> Self-Evaluation Document – para 77

*by students in consultation with their college tutors and in the light of their individual needs.*

## **Assessment and feedback in class teaching**

4.6 This is another facet of class teaching provided by faculties and departments which is of particular significance to students and colleges. It has three aspects:

Assessment in classes

Reporting on class attendance and performance

Raising concerns with colleges

Classes operate in different ways according to their purpose, structure and discipline. A small class which is taken by the same individual over the period of a year is a different experience to a class which is programmed to have a different leader and topic for each session. The number of students in a class is also likely to be a significant factor. Whatever the specific structure of a class, it is important that information about the intended mechanisms for assessment and feedback is widely available to students and their colleges. Colleges should know what the arrangements will be for their students, be content with the proposed structure and have an established mechanism to pursue any concerns as and when they arise.

*4.7 All those offering faculty/departmentally organised class teaching should provide clear information about the framework for the class teaching offered, giving particular attention to its purpose, structure, assessment mechanisms and feedback. As a minimum, there should be an agreed mechanism for reporting on both the student's attendance (picking up non-attendance early in a term is of particular importance to colleges) and the student's performance in classes.*

4.8 Faculties/departments will recognise the importance of colleges being able to monitor these twin aspects of class teaching, especially where the classes are part of the core provision for the student's course. Feedback about the student's performance is of interest to the student as much as it is to the college, and faculties/departments should give particular thought to how their class teaching provides opportunities for formative assessment and consequent feedback.

4.9 Where concerns arise, it is important that students and colleges are clear as to where these should be taken. All faculties/departments should have a designated officer with whom concerns about any aspect of class teaching can be pursued. The widespread appointment of Directors of Undergraduate Studies or their equivalent should assist with this, and facilitate the cooperation between faculties/departments and colleges over various aspects of undergraduate education.

## 5. The links between teaching and research

5.1 In all aspects of its teaching the University stresses the distinctiveness of ‘the high level of engagement of senior research-active academics both in the tutorial teaching of undergraduates and in the supervision of graduates’<sup>14</sup>, which it sees as putting teachers’ own learning to use in enhancing the learning of the students they teach’<sup>15</sup>. The Strategic Plan continues:

Teaching by world class researchers introduces students to the latest thinking in their subject, develops critical thinking and multiple perspectives, and positions both undergraduates and graduates to understand and benefit from authentic research environments. Active researchers are best placed to train students in the use of research tools.<sup>16</sup>

5.2 It is recognised that the benefits to be gained by students from having teachers who are also active researchers do not necessarily follow automatically. In the relevant objective set out in the Strategic Plan, the University commits itself both to **sustain the teaching and supervision of all students by senior research-active academics, and (to) work towards a clear articulation and development of the research/teaching nexus**. To achieve the latter, substantial work is being undertaken by the Learning Institute on behalf of the Education Committee. The consequent report draws on extensive discussions with academic staff who have been involved in teaching for the majority of the University’s undergraduate courses.

5.3 In the light of this consultation, the report suggested that research might have a positive impact on teaching in a number of different ways:

- a) by encouraging enthusiasm and motivation on the part of both staff and students;
- b) by providing better resources for students to draw upon;
- c) by allowing students to benefit from staff being involved in research networks;
- d) by induction of students into the scholarly community, and
- e) by providing a context within which the student can learn about knowledge construction within the discipline.

5.4 Within this framework, the report identifies:

- existing ways in which the structure and design of courses and assessment provide opportunities for students to:
  - (a) benefit from the individual research strengths of academic staff (special papers, special options, research groups, tutorial flexibility) and see how the disciplines and skills of research (including research methodology) contribute to the conception of their discipline

<sup>14</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Learning and Teaching Strategy 2002-5 – para 2.1

<sup>16</sup> Strategic Plan, para 29

(b) explore ways in which disciplinary knowledge is constructed and developed via research and scholarship in their discipline (informally through contact with the work being undertaken by individual researchers, formally through research training components of the courses)

(c) have opportunities to engage in different forms of research (dissertation, fieldwork, research projects, learning in a research mode) and to have closer contact with a research environment and/or research methodology

- existing means by which the links between research and teaching are made clear to students through faculty/department and college literature, especially:

(a) highlighting parts of courses which are intended to promote or develop skills relevant to a later dissertation or project

(b) making explicit elements of courses which are intended to develop an understanding of how disciplinary knowledge is developed and articulated

(c) encouraging students to take full advantage of research seminars, visiting speakers, and other aspects of the life of the scholarly community/network of which they are temporary members.

*5.6 In the context of these findings and the University's commitment to the linkage between teaching and research, all those involved in undergraduate programmes are asked to monitor and make explicit the opportunities their subject offers for students to benefit from the research-teaching nexus.*

## 6. Examinations and assessment

### Workloads

6.1 Extensive guidance about reasonable workloads may be found in the literature produced by colleges and faculties/departments. Concerns about heavy workloads are a repeated thread in the responses to the annual course experience questionnaire (see <http://ceq.oucs.ox.ac.uk/intro.cfm>).

6.2 It is increasingly important in providing potential students with an accurate picture of studying in Oxford that the descriptions of workload at undergraduate level should be accurate, and should reflect the extent of expectations outside Full Term and in the vacations. This is also significant in view of concerns about the alignment of qualifications across Europe within the context of the Bologna Process. The great majority of handbooks provide very clear guidance. Two examples are reproduced below first from Physics and then from PPE .

At Oxford the teaching terms are quite short – they add up to about 24 weeks in one year. Therefore it is essential that you set aside significant amounts of time each vacation for academic work. The course assumes that you will do this. You should go over your notes, revising the material and supplementing it by information gained from tutorials and from your own reading. In addition to consolidating the previous term's work, you should also try to prepare for the next term's courses. Your tutors may also set you some specific vacation work.

UK degree courses are among the shortest in the world. They hold their own in international competition only because they are full-time courses, covering vacation as well as term. This is perhaps particularly true of Oxford, where the eight-week terms (technically called Full Terms) occupy less than half the year. Vacations have to include holiday time; and everyone recognises that for very many students they also have to include money-earning time. Nevertheless vacation study is vital. You are said to 'read' for an Oxford degree, and PPE is certainly a reading course: its 'study' is mainly the study of material obtained from books and other documents. In term you will mostly rush from one article or chapter to another, pick their bones, and write out your reactions. Vacations are the time for less hectic attention to complete books. Tutorials break a subject up; vacations allow consolidation. They give depth and time for serious thought. They are also particularly important for reading set or core texts.

6.3 As these handbook extracts make clear, expectations relating to academic work undertaken during the vacations form a key aspect of any consideration of workload. The Education Committee recognises that this is a matter which each faculty/department and each college deals with in its own way, but colleges and faculties/departments will understand that the University is often asked to describe such arrangements both in terms of study workloads and consistency of approach.

*6.4 All faculties/departments and colleges are asked to ensure that their descriptions of the undergraduate working year take full account of these concerns, and course descriptions make clear expectations relating to vacation work. The Education Committee may wish to consult further about how best to describe the expectations placed on undergraduate students during the course of a year, especially given the financial pressures on students.*

## **Formative assessment in colleges - ‘collections’<sup>17</sup>**

6.5 In the course of recent subject reviews it has become clear to the Education Committee that practice in relation to vacation work and a subsequent ‘collection’ and to ‘collections’ used to prepare for formal examinations is variable, not only from subject to subject and college to college but also between individual subject tutors within the same subject or college. While the Education Committee has strongly defended the maintenance of individual approaches within colleges and across colleges, it is bound to have concerns about the extent of any such variation in policy and practice.

6.6 The administering of ‘collections’ is a key element in the University’s description of, *inter alia*, the importance attached to:

The use of extensive formative assessment;

The availability of extensive examination practice in preparation for assessment by way of intensive sit-down timed written examinations;

The provision of extensive feedback not only via tutorial assignments but through the assessment of ‘collections’;

The expectation that undergraduates will use at least part of their vacations to consolidate material from a previous term or prepare material for the forthcoming term, and that these processes will be explicitly monitored by some form of ‘collection’;

The capacity to tailor support for an individual student based on the evidence of areas of weakness or difficulty provided by collections.

6.7 *As with tutorial practice, it is understood that there will be flexibility of patterns to reflect all or some of the points in 6.6 above. In addition to this flexibility, it remains important that students should:*

*Understand the purpose of the particular form of ‘collections’ used in any individual subject or college;*

*Expect feedback on submitted work within a reasonable time-scale.*

In addition, the Education Committee welcomes the consideration given to the role of ‘collections’ by the Senior Tutors’ Committee’s Quality Assurance Group and the specific recommendations from that group recently circulated to all colleges:

<sup>17</sup> ‘Collections’ is used in two ways in colleges: first, as here, to signify college assessments, and, second, to describe termly academic progress meetings usually with the head of house and Senior Tutor.

Colleges should use Collections or some other form of assessed work systematically as a significant element of formative assessment. Collection marks should be recorded and monitored by Organising Tutors and/or the Senior Tutor, and Colleges should regularly review whether each subject is receiving enough formative assessment. Students who miss collections should be followed up. Colleges should set a deadline for the return of collection marks of no later than Wednesday of 4<sup>th</sup> week, in advance of which College Offices might wish to circulate a timely reminder.

## **Types of assessment**

6.8 Types of assessment continue to develop across the University. The Strategic Plan explicitly ‘encourages developments in course design, teaching methods and assessment where appropriate to deliver excellence in education’ with a specific reference to ‘a particular focus on the use of a range of assessment methods’ (Strategy 1 (j) – para. 41). This encouragement is made clear in the relevant Education Committee *Policy and Guidance* while asking that proposals for types of assessment which move away from traditional formats include the rationale for the new approaches as clearly and fully as possible. The relevant section (see annexe A) asks for information about the following:

An explanation of the reason why the particular style of examining is proposed;

The academic purpose that the proposed method is intended to serve (including its relation to the learning outcomes set out in the Programme Specification);

The extent to which the overall form of examination proposed is an adequate assessment of the student’s coverage of the whole content of the course and their performance in the course;

The arrangements that are proposed to minimise plagiarism or other forms of cheating.

## **Appropriate amounts of assessment**

6.9 The University acknowledges that the chosen methods of assessment are those which the responsible body considers most appropriate for the teaching of the subject at Oxford, and they are likely to have been fine-tuned over a number of years. It welcomes one division’s view of the purposes of assessment within its departments and thinks that this is likely to be widely shared. MPLS suggests that its assessment methods aim to be properly rigorous, to provide a level playing field for all students, to smooth out unfair differences between college provision, to guard against plagiarism, and to facilitate verification.

6.10 The Education Committee’s concerns focus on the variety and balance of assessment, the overall examining load on students and the effective timetabling and administration of examinations. While employers often highlight the importance attached to recruiting students who have coped with the rigours of the current assessment regime, responsible bodies will want to assure themselves that their patterns of assessment continue to be the most effective means of examining their students and courses. The Strategic Plan specifically asks divisions, faculties and departments in reviewing the design of their courses to include a particular focus on the use of a range of assessment methods. A recent paper prepared for the Education Committee identifies the type of factors that might be considered.

1. Timed written papers have undoubted strengths as an assessment method for many of the learning objectives valued in Oxford. For example, they can assess knowledge and test a student's ability under time pressure to critically assess multiple perspectives on a topic and present a concise and informed argument. It is also argued that timed written exams are a safeguard against plagiarism.
2. Timed written exams are less effective at assessing certain research skills such as a student's ability to identify and appraise relevant sources independently, to present arguments and supporting evidence in depth, and to sustain and evaluate a long-term project. It could be argued that degree programmes which give timed written exams a very large weighting in the assessment framework are reducing the weight given to assessing these research skills. It might also mean that those skills used in timed written exams are being assessed repeatedly.

In this connection, faculties/departments should, as part of their annual review of student feedback, consider the results of the Oxford Student Course Experience Questionnaire (<http://ceq.oucs.ox.ac.uk/intro.cfm>) for their courses; and, in particular, the questions relating to student perceptions of workload and assessment.

6.11 Education Committee's Policy and Guidance relating to Examinations & Assessment ([http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/the Education Committee/guidance/examass06.pdf](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/the_Education_Committee/guidance/examass06.pdf)) asks all responsible bodies to use the annual reports by examiners, with their detailed breakdown of the assessment process, to monitor, *inter alia*:

Any changes which the examination process might have suggested in relation to the existing methods of assessment;

Any possible changes in examination conventions, procedures or regulations suggested by the examiners' experience of the examination process.

In so doing, responsible bodies are asked to consider the extent to which the assessment method used remains a valid, fair and reliable means of assessing student achievement, and whether there is any evidence that the amount of assessment or its timing is having a detrimental impact on the work of candidates. In addition, they are asked to ensure that within the overall range of courses offered by the University, each examination requires a broadly similar amount of work from candidates.

6.12 The University must also take full account of the SENDA requirements<sup>18</sup> both in relation to anticipatory and inclusive provision for the student body as a whole and in respect of particular adjustments to assessment methods which may be necessary for individual students. Early contact with the Disability Office and with the Examinations and Assessments Section at the Schools is vital to ensure that proper provision is being made.

6.13 *All responsible bodies should monitor the amount of assessment which they require of undergraduates, including the appropriate balance of different types of assessment, and make maximum use of the existing mechanisms available to monitor the impact of existing assessment on students collectively (student feedback, course experience questionnaires)*

<sup>18</sup> see <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/eop/disab/ddasenda.shtml> (currently under revision); <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/eop/disab/arrange.pdf>; <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/eop/disab/staff.shtml>.

*and as individuals (individual withdrawals and suspensions relating to examination demands).*

### **Withdrawal and suspension**

6.13 The expectations relating to students and examinations constitute the first major section of the *Examination Regulations*, and these form the overriding authority in such matters. In summary the regulations provide for withdrawal by undergraduate students directly but do not deal with suspension which has previously been regarded as a matter for the student's college. From 1 October 2006, withdrawal after the first examination paper requires the agreement of the student's college and the approval of the Proctors. Although there is little evidence of this having happened, there is a long-standing desire to ensure that tactical withdrawal be outlawed.

6.14 Withdrawal from a course for a longer period by means of suspension is not governed by University regulations other than those dealing with overstanding for honours. Without seeking special dispensation, a student on a three-year course must be examined within four years; a student on a four-year course must be examined within five years. Suspension is deemed to be a college matter but should take account of the time limits provided within the regulations.

6.15 *In conjunction with the Senior Tutors Committee, the Education Committee is consulting divisions/CE on the current approaches to suspensions for undergraduate students. This guidance will be extended in the light of the conclusions reached.*

## Annexe A: The five categories of information for all undergraduate handbooks

1. **Qualitative descriptors for each classification level.** Qualitative classification descriptors are useful not only to examiners and assessors, but also to students. They can help students understand what is expected for each classification level. The qualitative descriptors may well eventually change, but the handbooks available in Michaelmas 2008 should at least contain the current descriptors.

Qualitative descriptors are typically combined with the **University standardised expression of agreed final marks**, shown below. At undergraduate level, the University requires all examiners in Honour Moderations and second public examinations to express agreed final marks for individual papers (including those for formally assessed course work) on the basis of the following class boundaries.

70 - 100	First Class
60 – 69	Upper Second
50 – 59	Lower Second
40 – 49	Third
30 – 39	Pass in Finals/Honour Mods
29 – 0	Fail

2. **The use of independent double marking or agreed alternatives** (often called ‘blind double marking’). It is important to show students that processes are in place to ensure that that a student’s mark is not affected by relatively severe or lenient marking. The Education Committee’s policy requires that independent double marking is used in all papers except those where there is a precise model solution and marking scheme approved by the examiners for every question. An alternative method to independent double marking has been agreed for Jurisprudence.

Where independent double blind marking is used, some handbooks describe it, others do not mention it. Where it is mentioned, there is not always a clear explanation of what independent double marking is.

3. **The weight given to each paper:** It is now unusual for all papers<sup>19</sup> in a course to be given equal weight. In some courses the relative weighting given to papers is buried in Examination Regulations or not made explicit at all. Where papers are equally weighted, this is not always clearly stated in handbooks, and it may not be obvious to the students, who might presume that, say, a dissertation is given greater weight than a timed written paper. The Earth Science, Materials and Physics handbooks provide examples of good practice. These handbooks clearly lay out in tables the weight given

<sup>19</sup> The term ‘paper’ is taken to include timed written examinations as well as orals, assessed practicals, and projects/dissertations/theses

to each paper. For those students taking a four year course, these handbooks also state clearly how marks gained in the third year are weighted to determine the classification gained in the fourth year.

4. **Classification conventions:** In most of the physical and life science courses, a student' final classification level is based on the overall weighted average mark. Most other courses have a rule which states that a student has achieved a particular final classification level if they have achieved a specific overall average mark or higher *and* achieved a specific average mark or higher in a certain number of papers.

Humanities courses at undergraduate level should now all follow the classification convention in the box below (this was a policy adopted by the division in October 2003).

*Classification convention for Humanities subjects*

First	<p>Either</p> <p>Average mark of 68.5 or greater. At least two marks of 70 or above No mark below 50</p> <p>Or ('First by the alternative route', only now used in Music and Theology) Three-eighths of the candidate's papers must be at 75 or above, and none below 50, and the candidate must have an overall average of 65.</p>
Upper second	<p>Average mark of 59 or greater At least two marks of 60 or above No mark below 40</p>
Lower second	<p>Average mark of 49.5 or greater At least two marks of 50 or above No mark below 30</p>
Third	<p>Average mark of 40 or greater Not more than one mark below 30</p>
Pass	<p>Average mark of 30 or greater No more than two marks below 30</p>

## ANNEXE B

Extract from the Education Committee's *Policy and Guidance on the Introduction of New Courses and Major Changes to Existing Courses (2008)*, p.7.

### 4.4. Assessment methods

Detailed information should be provided including:

- the proposed or any revised assessment methods involved in the course and their appropriateness for the intended learning outcomes of the course (how will the required assessment enable the student to demonstrate what he or she has learnt and is able to do as a result of taking the course?)\*.
- sample or specimen exam papers for the new course or option.

In relation to the revision of an existing course, reference should be made to any ways in which the proposed revision amends or develops assessment methods. Particular care should be taken to explain the reason for any proposed changes in assessment methods.

In scrutinising proposals for first and second public examinations, and the examination of taught graduate courses, the Education Committee will look in each case for:

- an explanation of the reason why the particular mode of examining is proposed;
- the academic purpose that the proposed method is intended to serve (including its relation to the learning outcomes set out in the Programme Specification);
- the extent to which the overall form of examination proposed is an adequate assessment of the student's coverage of the whole content of the course and their performance in the course\*;
- the arrangements that are proposed to minimise plagiarism or other forms of cheating.

In the case of dissertations, extended essays, project work and other examined assignments, proposals should include

- a statement describing the appropriate role of the tutor or supervisor(s). Regulations may reasonably provide guidance on this matter.

[A reasonable involvement in relation to dissertations, extended essays, assignments etc. might extend to suggesting appropriate reading, discussing contentious points, commenting on the proposed structure of an assignment, and reading a first draft of any piece of work.]

Under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA), the responsible body has a duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people or students. While this does not require a responsible body to do anything that might mean it cannot maintain academic or other prescribed standards in a particular programme of study, it might be reasonable to allow a student to validate the attainment of the necessary academic standards by using different assessment procedures. In describing the assessment regime for a new course, reference should be made to any acceptable alternative methods of assessment which could be employed in place of what it proposes.