

## **NREG COLLEGE**

### **PREPARING COURSE HANDBOOKS: A GUIDE**

Each course should have a handbook in which course information is presented to students. In this guide we explore what course teams should include in their handbooks, how the information might be presented, and the relationship between the course handbook and other sources of information for students, particularly the online content provided in the generic student handbook on the University website.

The handbook also forms the primary source of information about the course for validation and re-approval panels. Consequently, it is important that by reading the course handbook, students and reviewers are able to get a thorough picture of the course's provision.

Where a number of courses share information, you may wish to provide either unified course handbooks (where a small number of courses share a single course handbook) and/or generic handbooks (where elements common to the courses are gathered together). Unified course handbooks are particularly useful where there is either considerable sharing of teaching between courses, or where there is a clear progression route between courses. The use of generic handbooks eases the work of collating and updating generic information that is common across course types or course delivery locations.

Many courses also need to provide a work placement handbook (or similar), and most provide separate module handbooks and final year dissertation handbooks. This is usually done in separate documents to the course handbook, but some course teams choose to combine documents to good effect.

#### **Purpose**

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The intention is that each course handbook should act as a reference document for students throughout their time on the course. It should:

- provide details of the course's structure and curriculum
- be easily navigable for both new and experienced students
- explain how the course operates in terms of learning, teaching and assessment, and explain the course management structure and processes
- give information on the course specific support that students may make use of, and how it may be accessed.

While staff are familiar with the way higher education works, the language and jargon used, and the processes and policies that govern and control student life, new students can find the HE environment very strange. Validation documents describe proposed courses for inspection by academic staff and other qualified representatives. The course handbook should adopt a different style, adapting the communication to make it more accessible and understandable to students. Consequently, it is rarely appropriate to simply replicate content from validation documents in a course handbook; teams should consider how to best

communicate information to students and make the text user friendly. This might involve using a more chatty style of writing (use “you” rather than “a student” or “students”), conveying some information in bullet points, providing illustrations and examples that expand textual descriptions, using a less formal page layout, providing a glossary of academic and subject terms, jargon and acronyms used, and including more pictures to break up text.

## **Publication of course information**

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It is expected that all course handbooks will be made available to students in an electronic format through course areas on the online learning environment, Brightspace. Similarly, work placement handbooks (and dissertation handbooks where relevant) should be provided on Brightspace through appropriate module areas, the course area, or both. This provision should allow students to print handbooks in a form that allows them to access the information – in larger print or on coloured paper for example.

## **Course handbook structure and content**

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It is expected that each course team will produce a course handbook that is designed and compiled to suit their particular student cohorts. A template is provided in order to help course teams produce consistent and complete documents (available on the course approval, modification and review pages on the University website). The template was significantly revised for 2019-20 provision onwards, with the section ordering aligned to the NSS questions’ sections.

This section explores the areas of content that teams should consider including in their handbook. There is an expectation that some information is included in all course handbooks, and teams should seek to adhere to this. Other information may have little or no relevance to some courses and may be omitted.

### **Introduction**

The title page and introductory text should make explicit the essential course details, provide a welcome to students starting the course, and give an overview of the course handbook and its relationship with other documents such as generic handbooks and online material.

- Award details: The full title of the course’s awards must be clearly stated, including indication of the awarding body, the University of Suffolk, and the location(s) of delivery. Where the course is accredited or operates under a specific regulatory body, details of this should also be made explicit and explained. In cases where students might expect particular accreditation that is not provided, this should also be explained.
- Document statements: There should be a statement noting:
  - any accompanying documents that should be read alongside the course handbook (e.g. work placement handbook, module handbooks, dissertation handbook)
  - the availability of the document in larger print or alternative forms (e.g. “Upon request to your Course Leader this handbook can be produced in a larger font. An electronic

- copy can be found in your course area on the online learning environment, Brightspace.”)
  - the date of the production of the handbook along with a statement on the correctness of the details (e.g. “This handbook was compiled on [insert date] and the information presented is correct as of that date.”)
  - where more up to date versions (when produced) will be made available to students.
- Welcome paragraphs: A statement welcoming students to the course should form the opening of the handbook. This should:
  - ✓ explore the purpose of the handbook and provide an overview of its contents
  - ✓ summarise the course in terms of what it covers, what students can expect to experience, and what will be expected from the students
  - ✓ note the availability of generic material on MySuffolk and the University website, and the availability of other accompanying documents such as placement handbooks, module booklets, and dissertation handbooks where applicable.
  - ✓ Provide an introduction to higher education for relevant undergraduate courses, emphasising the differences between study at FE and HE levels and the expectations for students to develop skills to enable them to take responsibility for their own learning.
- Document navigation: A table of contents should be provided; the use of a glossary might be helpful.
- The Course Team: using the template’s table, include a list of all staff involved with the course, including academic, administrative, technical support and management staff members, indicating their roles and providing contact details. Providing pictures of staff members can be helpful to students, and it may be worth providing a link to an area on the University’s web site where academic staff profiles are available. Many teams choose to provide just email addresses for academic staff but some also provide telephone numbers. Expectations for student communication with the course team are set out later in the handbook and the content here should align with this.

## **About my course**

The course handbook is designed for students that have enrolled on the course and have already decided that this is the course for them. Therefore, they are most interested in what they will be studying and how their learning will be supported and enabled.

- Course overview. A general overview of the course’s rationale, purpose and focus should be presented to the students, along with some indication of what the course will be preparing the students for in their future, mentioning key progression routes. Where the course is accredited, or provides a route towards accreditation, this should be explained. Similarly, any links with external agencies that support or inform the course should also be explained.
- Course aims and learning outcomes. You should present learning outcomes for each level of provision and, where appropriate, for each integrated award. We would normally

expect around eight to ten outcomes per level although the requirements of some professionally accredited awards will sometime need significantly more outcomes to be made explicit. The presentation of course learning outcomes should be accompanied with an explanation of what they are and how they relate to the student's study and assessment.

### **The teaching on my course**

Students beginning the course will have a range of previous experiences of education. The course handbook should portray the methods of learning and teaching that students can expect to encounter, and how they may best succeed in their studies.

- An interactive guide entitled “Communicating your learning, teaching and assessment strategy to students”, designed to help course teams portray their learning, teaching and assessment strategies to students is available from the University's Quality Manual.
- For undergraduate courses, the differences between HE culture and that of lower educational levels should be explored. The expectation that students are moving (possibly from being dependent learners doing exactly as directed by their teacher) towards being independent learners, where they take individual responsibility for their study activities, should be explored.
- Explore the types of learning that the students will be expected to be involved in the development of their: knowledge and understanding; cognitive abilities; subject specific skills; and in generic graduate skills.

### **Learning Opportunities**

This section should be used to describe the intended student experience of learning and teaching, exploring the scheduled learning opportunities, the use of the online learning environment, work-based learning, the students' use of independent study time, and opportunities for students to develop their employability and progression potential.

- Scheduled learning and teaching activities. Explain the different types of tutor-led or contact sessions provided on the course, so that students know what to expect, how to prepare, and what will be expected of them. For example, this discussion might cover:
  - lectures
  - seminars
  - tutorials
  - laboratory sessions
  - workshops
  - webinars and other synchronous online activity
  - final year project tutorials
- Online Learning Environment (Brightspace). Describe the course team's use of the online learning environment, Brightspace, and how the team expects their students to engage with this resource. For courses involving online or distance learning, this discussion should be fairly expansive.
- Work-based learning (could be retitled 'Placement Learning' where more appropriate). In this section you should draw out for students how their learning within work-based settings form an integral part of their course, and how this is facilitated, monitored and evidenced.

- Planning your learning. This section provides you with an opportunity to set out clearly the expectations you have on students to take responsibility for their learning. For example, you might explore how they should prepare for sessions, and what independent learning and reading should they engage with (and how might this change as they progress through the course).
- Preparing for your future. Providing opportunities for students to prepare and plan for post-graduation opportunities will be integrated into your provision and this should be highlighted to students in this section.
  - Course teams are expected to present to students their understanding on 'employability' as it applies to their course. For guidance on this, and how the HEA Employability Framework should form the basis for this, please refer to the careers team and their online content.
  - Opportunities within the curriculum for students to develop employment related skills and attributes should be highlighted here. The content here may helpfully refer students to fuller details as provided in the module specifications.
  - Professional and career development opportunities (such as internships, carers events, and optional placements) should be signposted.
  - The online careers portal, Future Me, and its use to enable student progression and development through both in- and extra-curricular engagement, should be discussed.

## **Organisation and management of the course**

Course structure. Present the course structure in both tabular form and through narrative description. The way in which modules develop the students' understanding and skills over their period of study should be explained. Particular attention should be given to explaining any options that students have in their module choice, and how each choice limits or expands their study options later in the course. In courses with set pathways, teams should endeavour to communicate these clearly. Courses with clear progression routes may need to discuss how a student's module choice will affect their options on the progression course. Some students find the provision of exemplar student study profiles, along with some reasoning for their content, very helpful.

Where applicable, course teams should note that where there are a variety of modules available as part of the course, they may not all be available every year.

Students should be normally provided with module specifications as part of the handbook as set out in the template, although some teams provide a separate document containing these<sup>1</sup>. In the handbook, course teams should explain the format of module specifications, explaining the meaning of each section, and should also note that the particular content each year can vary in focus, and that it is possible for modules to be formally changed during the student's time at the University. It may be helpful to mention the validation process,

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<sup>1</sup> This can be particularly useful where a number of courses share modules, or where there is an expectation that most students will progress from one course to another.

particularly when a re-approval of the course is due to take place during the expected period of study of new students.

Academic Year. You should explain to students how the year is organised, explaining, where pertinent, semesters, terms, reading weeks, placement periods, exam weeks and assessment boards. Provision of specific dates is helpful but not always possible.

Typical Week. It is helpful to provide to students a pen-picture of what their typical week of study will look like. In this, you should capture not just the typical scheduled contact times but also what students would expect to do as part of their study in the rest of the week (guided and independent learning, work experience, ...). It is helpful to draw out how the experience varies through the course, both as students progress through and develop as independent learners, and where relevant through different phases of their study (such as 'on-placement' and 'off-placement', 'on-campus' and 'in-work').

## **Assessment and Feedback**

The course handbook should provide a clear picture of all assessment processes that the students will need to follow, and provide guidance on the nature of assessment tasks that could be required of the students. Assessment is the area of the handbook that students are most likely to refer back to during their time at the University. The information provided here, along with any documents referred to, should capture all aspects of the assessment process and any associated policies and regulations.

You are expected to provide a description of the general approach you take to assessment on the course, exploring how you see assessment taking an integral part of the students' learning as well as a means of gauging achievement. Further guidance on this is available in the on-line guide exploring the presentation of Learning, Teaching and Assessment in student handbooks.

To help students understand what is expected of them in assessments, review the types of assessment that they might encounter on their course. Thus, where appropriate, teams may explore:

- Essays, reports, and other written submissions. It is worth exploring the differences between the different forms of written assessment used on the course. Reference to report templates that guide student submissions can be usefully included.
- Presentations and other performance based assessments.
- Exams. Courses that hold open book exams should explain this to students.
- Group work assessment. Where group work is used for summative assessment, it is helpful to present the approach that the team uses for this.
- Final year dissertation or research project.

The following areas should be covered in all student handbooks:

- Assessment summary. Provide a summary (usually in tabular form) of the assessments that students will be expected to undertake within their course, noting for each module the nature and size of the summative components that will be required. Details of any formative assessment opportunities should also be provided.
- Assessment schedules. Assessment schedules provide students with key dates including assessment submission dates, when feedback will be provided, dates of publication of Assessment Board decisions and referral tutorial dates. Note how and when assessment schedules for each academic year are published, highlighting the importance for students to manage their work and study time in order to meet deadlines. Note any sources of support that are available to students in developing skills in time management.
- Harvard referencing. As the standard referencing format, all students should normally be required to use Harvard referencing in their assessment work. This is fully documented on MySuffolk in the library's area. There are a limited number of courses that choose to employ alternative systems to make citations in student work – those that do should make this clear and include a full explanation of how students should employ this in their work.
- Word counts. The purpose of having word counts associated with pieces of assessment work should be explained, and the course team's approach to the application of word count limits should be detailed. For example, it should be made clear how work that fails to reach, or is much longer than, set word counts will be treated.
- Drafts. The agreed approach of the course team with regard to looking at drafts of student work and giving feedback in advance of submission should be explained.
- How to submit work. Outline the processes students should follow when submitting work, particularly noting where work is to be submitted and the use of assignment receipts. Where online submission is used, explain how this is done along with the role of the plagiarism and collusion checking software.
- Marking criteria. The means by which work is marked against criteria should be explained to students. Teams should emphasise the importance of meeting **all** assessment criteria in an assignment or exam. All courses are expected to either use the University of Suffolk Generic Marking Criteria or use criteria derived from them – the generic criteria are included at the end of the template for convenience.
- Feedback. Emphasise the importance of feedback (of all forms: informal, formative and summative) to inform future work and learning activities, and indicate how feedback on assessments is given to students on the course (how long after submission or Assessment Boards, how it is distributed, reference to assessment schedule for feedback dates, etc). Also note how students can access further opportunities to discuss feedback and to get support to take action(s) on feedback.

## Academic Support

In this section you have an opportunity to explore the way in which the course team provide support for students. Under 'Tutorial support' you should explain both academic support available from module tutors, and further support available at course level (including advice on progression and module choice). You should indicate how students can access this support. You can add to the template to include placement and work-based support roles, support available through University and local support departments / personnel (such as Learning Services and Student services for Ipswich based courses), and other relevant support opportunities.

This section can be used effectively to set out to students what they can reasonably expect in terms of communication and response times. It would be expected that all course teams adopt a consistent approach to communications with students – how students are expected to contact staff and how soon they should expect a response – and this section can be employed to make this explicit.

## Resources

The University's online student handbook will provide students with details of the generic resources that they are able to access to enable and support their learning. The course handbook should provide more detail on course-specific resources, for example:

- Timetabled session locations. Give details of where the scheduled teaching and learning sessions are likely to take place, listing and explaining any particular specialist equipment that will be employed.
- Library services. The generic information contained in the University's student handbook can be usefully supplemented by course specific information such as the location of subject specific reading material and the availability of any particularly useful journals or publications. External resources should also be outlined, along with links to further information on accessing them.

## Learning Community

This section is an opportunity to encourage your students to see themselves as members of the larger community, e.g. of learners, academic staff and other members of the University. This could be done by emphasising:

- Opportunities for students in different levels or cohorts to work together or share learning activity – this could include online discussion boards and blogs, peer learning and support processes, and shared workshop environments where mutual criticality and encouragement is expected.
- Opportunities within the School or College for students on different courses to meet, tackle problems together, or share and discuss common interests and passions.
- Opportunities to take an active part in School research projects and activities.



- School and University events such as public lectures and exhibitions, conferences, and performances.
- Becoming an alumni following graduation, and the ways in which alumni contribute to the university and current students' experiences.
- Opportunities to engage with external agencies through University projects and services, and with employers and enterprises to take an active part in live projects.
- Social events and Students' Union societies.

## **Student Voice**

The template includes explanatory text exploring the opportunities students have to provide feedback on their experience and to influence the University's future development. You may add to this to reflect further local opportunities such as Dean's meetings or Student Voice fora.

## **Work-based learning handbooks**

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For all courses that include work placements or work-based learning, a handbook that provides students with information on this aspect of their course should be provided. This should be developed with reference to the University's Work-Based and Placement Learning Policy.

The nature of the relationship between the course and the type of work experience employed will dictate the depth and range of information that should be provided within the handbook. However, in general it is expected that all the areas set out below would be given some consideration. The list set out below is not expected to be exhaustive, and many courses will need to include other essential information relevant to their particular context. For example, Health courses will need to include or refer to the dress code that students should adhere to whilst in work settings. It might be helpful to consider the work-based learning handbook as a document that a student will take with them to their work environment to refer to as their main source of information whilst there.

- Introduction. Students may not be familiar with terms such as work-based learning and work placements, and should be briefed on the course teams' expectations for this aspect of the course. An introduction to the handbook should give an overview, explaining:
  - whether the work-based learning is compulsory
  - how they are linked to employers
  - how much time they will spend within a work environment
  - what sort of activities they will be expected to engage in while in the work environment (observation, participation, etc)
  - how their work experience will link with the rest of their studies and their assessment.
- Aims, benefits and learning outcomes. It is key to successful work-based learning that students, employers and teaching staff have a shared vision of the purpose of such activity. This should be communicated to students within the handbook via the most

appropriate means. Previous handbooks have supported discussion of this with the inclusion of:

- a ‘benefits’ section setting out what both students and employers gain out of the experience
  - a list of aims for the work-based learning
  - a list of specific learning outcomes that students demonstrate through work-based learning.
- Staff roles. The role of members of the course team involved in supporting work-based learning should be explained. For example, some courses use placement supervisors to support students whilst in work settings. The handbook should explain what staff in specified roles are responsible for, and what students are expected to do or provide to enable them to support them effectively. Roles, names and contact details should all be clearly set out.
  - How placements or work-based learning arrangements are set up. This will be a significant section of many handbooks, particularly for courses where students are responsible for finding their own placements. Issues that should be explored include:
    - The type of work environment that is acceptable (e.g. employment sector required, nature of the work that the student will observe or undertake, the facilities or employer information that the student will need to be able to access and employ, and whether voluntary organisations are appropriate employers).
    - The degree of involvement with the employer organisation that the student will require in order to allow the experience to support their learning and assessment activities. This may include indications on the amount of time that the student will spend in the work environment, the responsibility that the student will need to be able to take, and the support that the employer’s organisation will need to provide (for example via a mentor).
    - Any processes employed by the course team and the University to ensure that placement opportunities are appropriate. Where students find their own placement, details of how these are approved should be set out. How this procedure forms part of the admissions process for students already in employment and hoping to use their work situation to form their work experience opportunity should be detailed.
  - What happens if things go wrong. Guidelines should be set out for students to enable them to deal with situations such as:
    - a premature end to their work placement
    - conflicts with others, or other occurrences within the work environment that make their continuance in placement impractical
    - the student falling ill or facing personal difficulties while in placement.
  - Employers’ responsibilities. Where relevant, students should be informed of what the University expects from employers providing work experience opportunities. Where there is a formal agreement whereby employers commit to taking on students, this should be included (and explained where relevant).

- Student entitlements. Support available for students (both from the employer and from the University) should be made explicit, along with details of how this support might be accessed when the student is not on University premises. In particular, indication should be made of how much contact the students can expect to have with University tutors while they are on placement, and how any work place mentors are allocated.
- Mentors. Where employers are expected to provide mentors for each student, this should be explored in some detail, ensuring that students understand the role of a mentor, the nature and amount of support that will be made available to them from their mentor, and the limitation of what the mentor will be able to do for them.
- Professional practice. Students should be made aware of the expectations on them in terms of their conduct in their work environment. This might include issues such as confidentiality, ethics, working with others, working with clients, health and safety, working safely with technical equipment, use of IT and other facilities, and relevant statutory legislation.
- Assessment. An explanation of how the work-based learning contributes to assessment within the course should be provided. For example, where students are expected to maintain reflective diaries or work activity diaries, then guidance on the purpose, expected content, and format of such documents would be valuable. Where student assessment includes evaluations of their activities while within their work environment, who will be responsible for this and how this will be done should be explained.
- Previous work experience. Some students, on entering the course, may be able to evidence significant prior relevant work experience. If this could be counted towards the course's assessment (for example through the recognition of prior learning process), then this should be explained. If this is not the case, an explanation of the reasons why further work experience is necessary can help students understand the purpose of the work experience elements of their course, particularly for mature students.
- Employability skills. Indications of how students may have opportunities to gain evidence of their achievement of employability skills can be useful. Noting how the activities pursued within the workplace can be recorded and employed in support of future job applications can be useful to some students.
- Student feedback. As with all parts of a course, we are committed to seeking and acting on feedback from students on their experiences. Mention should be made on how students are able to provide feedback on their experiences of work-based learning and how this related to the rest of their course.

In many work-based learning handbooks, course teams find it appropriate to include sector specific information that prepares or supports the students in their activities.