Office for Students

Quality assessment report

**Computing courses at the University of Northampton
January 2023 – June 2023**

Contents

Summary

Each year, the Office for Students (OfS) selects a number of providers for investigation based on regulatory intelligence including, but not limited to, student outcome and experience data and relevant notifications. As part of these investigations, the OfS may commission an assessment team, including external academic experts, to undertake an assessment of quality. The quality assessment focuses on areas of potential concern indicated by the data or other regulatory intelligence, or by information obtained by the assessment team as part of the assessment.

The assessment involves a visit to a provider, after which the assessment team produces a report. This report represents the conclusions of the team as a result of its consideration of information gathered during the course of the assessment to 9 June 2023. The report does not take into account matters which may have occurred subsequent to that period.

In line with the risk-based approach of the OfS, the assessment team does not undertake a comprehensive quality assessment in respect of every requirement in each condition of registration, and therefore this report should not be read as the team having undertaken such an assessment.

This report does not represent any decision of the OfS in respect of compliance with conditions of registration.

1. The OfS requires all registered higher education providers' courses to meet a minimum set of requirements or conditions that relate to quality and standards. The detailed requirements of these conditions can be found in the OfS's regulatory framework.[1] As a result of the OfS's general monitoring, in January 2023 the OfS decided to open an investigation into the quality of computing courses provided by the University of Northampton.

2. The University of Northampton ('the university') offers computing courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level through the Faculty of Arts, Science and Technology, abbreviated to FAST ('the faculty'). The faculty is based at the university's Waterside campus.

3. The OfS appointed an assessment team on 12 January 2023 that consisted of three academic expert assessors and an assessment coordinator. The team were asked to give their advice and judgements about the quality of the university's computing courses.

4. The team considered a range of information. The team visited the University of Northampton on two occasions in February and March 2023, during which time it had a tour of facilities and met with staff and students.

5. During the assessment process, the team developed lines of enquiry. These focused on areas that potentially warranted further investigation and that were within the scope of ongoing conditions of registration:

   - B1: Academic experience

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[1] See Regulatory framework for higher education in England - Office for Students.

- B2: Resources, support and student engagement

- B4: Assessment and awards.

6. The lines of enquiry were developed and updated between the two visits and both versions were shared with the university. This process followed the OfS's risk-based approach.

7. Through its activities the team identified seven areas of concern in relation to computing courses that may relate to the University of Northampton's compliance with the OfS's conditions of registration:

Concern 1: that the course delivery model is not effective for the nature of the undergraduate student cohort. This concern relates to condition of registration B1 because this condition requires that the university ensures that students receive a high quality academic experience.

Concern 2: that the quality of information available to students about assessment is limited; it is not clear or consistent. This concern relates to condition of registration B1 because this condition requires that the university ensures that students receive a high quality academic experience.

Concern 3: that there is limited access to resources that would support games students' independent learning. This concern relates to condition of registration B2 because this condition requires that the university takes steps to ensure students receive sufficient resources and support.

Concern 4: that students have insufficient access to specialist learning resources. This concern relates to condition of registration B2 because this condition requires that the university takes steps to ensure students receive sufficient resources and support.

Concern 5: that there is limited academic learning support for computing students. This concern relates to condition of registration B2 because this condition requires that the university takes steps to ensure students receive sufficient resources and support.

Concern 6: that ineffective systems and processes impact the effectiveness of academic support for students. This concern relates to condition of registration B2 because this condition requires that the university takes steps to ensure students receive sufficient resources and support.

Concern 7: that assessment information and feedback is insufficient to enable all students to use it effectively to inform the development of their work. This concern relates to condition of registration B4 because this condition requires that the university ensures that students are assessed effectively.

Introduction and background

8.   Each year, the OfS selects a number of higher education providers for investigation based on regulatory intelligence including, but not limited to, student outcome and experience data and relevant notifications. As part of these investigations, the OfS may commission an assessment team, including external academic experts, to undertake an assessment of quality. The quality assessment focuses on areas of potential concern indicated by the data or other regulatory intelligence, or by information obtained by the assessment team as part of the assessment.

9.   The assessment involves a visit to a provider, after which the assessment team produces a report. In line with the risk-based approach of the OfS, the assessment team does not undertake a comprehensive quality assessment in respect of every requirement in each condition of registration, and therefore this report should not be read as the team having undertaken such an assessment.

10. This report does not represent any decision of the OfS in respect of compliance with conditions of registration.

11. The OfS appointed a team in January 2023 to assess the quality of the computing courses provided by the University of Northampton (i.e. those courses delivered by the university, excluding courses delivered by partner organisations and transnational education (TNE)). The assessment included matters that fall within the scope of ongoing conditions B1, B2, and B4. The scope of the assessment, the information considered, and the findings of the assessment team are summarised in this report.

12. This report represents the conclusions of the team as a result of its consideration of information gathered during the course of the assessment to 9 June 2023. The report does not take into account matters which may have occurred subsequent to that period.

13. The OfS decided to open this investigation as part of its approach to general monitoring and in the context of its decision to focus on the quality of computing courses. In opening the investigation, the OfS had regard to information it held relating to the University of Northampton, including student outcomes data, numbers of students, and any notifications received.

Context

14. **Location:** Computing courses at the University of Northampton are delivered through the Faculty of Arts, Science and Technology (FAST). Most of the computing courses at the University of Northampton are delivered within the faculty's technology subject area.

15. **Computing provision** is provided in the Creative Hub and Learning Hub buildings. In 2018 the University of Northampton moved to the Waterside campus, closing its Park (Kingsthorpe) and Avenue (Maidwell) campuses. The university states that the move was made to secure a more central and accessible site within Northampton that would also be more attractive to prospective students both in the UK and overseas.

16. **Subjects:** The computing subject area is split between two sub-areas: Computing including Business Computing, and Games. The only computing course delivered under a different

subject area is the BSc (Hons) Esports course, which is delivered under the Science subject area, and Sport and Exercise sub-area.

17. **Student numbers:** Overall, based on information provided by the university in January 2023, the University of Northampton currently delivers computing courses to 642 full-time equivalent (FTE) students, representing approximately five per cent of the university's taught and registered student population. Of the computing student cohort, 517 students are studying for their first degree, and 116 are studying postgraduate taught courses. Changes in computing student numbers at the university over the past four years, are shown in Table 1.[2]

Table 1: Computing student numbers for students taught at the University of Northampton, 2018-19 to 2021-22

Mode and level of study	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Full-time undergraduates	460	450	480	460
Part-time undergraduates	10	10	10	10
Apprenticeship undergraduates	[DPL]	[DPL]	[DPL]	[DPL]
Full-time postgraduates	30	110	130	170
Part-time postgraduates	20	20	10	10
Apprenticeship postgraduates	[DPL]	[DPL]	[DPL]	[DPL]

Table 1 note: '[DPL]' means there are few students in this category and the exact figure has been suppressed for data protection reasons.

18. **Current computing offer:** The university currently offers 10 undergraduate computing courses, and four postgraduate taught computing courses. In addition, students are still registered on undergraduate courses to which the university no longer recruits, with these courses now in a teach-out phase. The courses now in teach-out used a pathway approach, where students would register on a general computing or business computing degree and then choose a named pathway (reflected in the award title) later in their courses, which would determine the nature of modules they studied at Levels 5 and 6. These courses were phased out from September 2021 (business computing) and September 2022 (general computing), and replaced by the current courses where students may choose to enrol on a more specialised degree from the outset. A new version of the integrated foundation year was launched in 2021. Table 2[3] shows student FTE data per course. Figures for each include students registered on courses including an integrated foundation year.

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[2] Source: OfS size and shape of provision data dashboard, as published on 12 April 2023.

[3] Source: Information submitted by the university, 4 January 2023.

Table 2: Student FTE per computing course (including all modes of study, and courses including an integrated foundation year), as of 4 January 2023

Course	Student FTE	Course status
BSc Business Computing (Systems)	2.5	No longer recruiting
BSc Business Computing (Web Design)	2.5	No longer recruiting
BSc Computer Games Development	0.5	No longer recruiting
BSc Computing	36	No longer recruiting
BEng Computing (Computer Network Engineering)	12.5	No longer recruiting
BEng Computing (Computer Systems Engineering)	2	No longer recruiting
BSc Computing (Software Engineering)	58	No longer recruiting
BSc Computing (Web Technology & Security)	14	No longer recruiting
BA Animation	0	New course set to launch in September 2023
BSc Artificial Intelligence & Data Science	9	Current course
BSc Business Computing	47.5	Current course
BSc Computer Networks Engineering	9.5	Current course
BSc Computer Science	73	Current course
BSc Esports	35.5	Current course
BA Games Art	42	Current course
BA Games Design	62	Current course
BSc Games Programming	34	Current course
BSc Software Engineering	47.5	Current course
BSc Web Development & Cyber Security	29	Current course
MSc Computing	79.5	Current course
MSc Computing (Computer Network Engineering)	5	Current course
MSc Computing (Internet Technology & Security)	15.5	Current course
MSc Computing (Software Engineering)	16	Current course

19. The university's current portfolio of undergraduate computing courses, excluding courses that are no longer recruiting, is made up of 90 distinct modules. These consist of 68 from the

computing subject field and 22 from the sport and exercise subject field, the latter of which are used exclusively by the BSc Esports course. Students studying courses that include an integrated foundation year study three core modules that are shared across all such courses offered by the university, and one additional module more specific to their subject, usually the foundations in physical sciences module for computing students.

20. **Student composition:** As set out in Tables 3 to 6,[4] compared with the total population of students taught at OfS-registered providers, full-time undergraduate students taught at the University of Northampton are more likely to:

- be mature (over 21 years old at entry)

- enter from access courses or foundation degrees, or hold BTEC qualifications (lower than Distinction-Distinction-Merit (DDM)) on entry

- be from areas not local to the university

- be from Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintiles 1 or 2.

Table 3: Age of students on entry (full-time undergraduates), 2018-19 to 2021-22

Age on entry	All OfS-registered providers (%)	University of Northampton (%)
Under 21 years	78.6	69.1
21 to 30 years	14.3	19.1
31 years and over	7.1	11.8

Table 4: Entry qualifications (full-time undergraduates), 2018-19 to 2021-22

Entry qualifications	All OfS-registered providers (%)	University of Northampton (%)
A-levels (CDD or higher) or international baccalaureate	42.8	16.9
A-levels (DDD or lower), other L3 (105 tariff points or higher) or two A-levels	9.4	14.9
Higher education level qualifications on entry	8.7	11.4
BTECS (at least DDM), or one A-level or two BTECs	7.5	9.4
BTECS (lower than DDM)	8.3	17.5
Other qualifications held by non-UK-domiciled students	1.0	0.7

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[4] Source: Tables 3-6 are based on datasets used to build the OfS size and shape of provision data dashboard, as published on 12 April 2023. Restricted to students taught at OfS-registered providers or the University of Northampton, respectively. Combining four years of data (academic years 2018-19 to 2021-22).

Entry qualifications	All OfS-registered providers (%)	University of Northampton (%)
Access courses, foundation courses or other Level 3, or 65 tariff points or higher	16.4	21.8
None, unknown or other entry qualifications	5.8	7.3

Table 5: Study location (full-time undergraduates), 2018-19 to 2021-22

Study location	All OfS-registered providers (%)	University of Northampton (%)
Local to address prior to entry	22.8	17.3
Not local to address prior to entry	76.9	82.5

Table 6: Deprivation quintile (full-time undergraduates), 2018-19 to 2021-22

Deprivation quintile (IMD)	All OfS-registered providers (%)	University of Northampton (%)
Quintile 1 or 2	31.5	39.6
Quintile 3, 4 or 5	48.3	47.3

Note: IMD is only available for UK-domiciled students.

21. When considering full-time undergraduate computing students only, taught at the University of Northampton in 2021-22, these students were:[5]

   - 82 per cent male

   - 88 per cent without a disclosed disability

   - 44 per cent described their ethnicity as white, 21 per cent as black, and 9 per cent as Asian

   - 19 per cent lived outside the UK before their studies

   - 38 per cent from IMD quintiles 1 or 2

   - 26 per cent aged 21 or over when they started their courses.

22. **Entry standards:** The admissions policy for computing courses was in accordance with the university's admissions, and equality and diversity policies. Applications were considered on merit from students from diverse educational and social backgrounds, and with a wide variety of educational qualifications including those with no formal qualifications (Programme specifications document).

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[5] Source: OfS size and shape of provision data dashboard, as published on 12 April 2023.

23. **Previous attainment standards:** Table 7 shows prior attainment data for full-time undergraduate 2020-21 entrants studying computing at the university of Northampton, with data for the sector overall included for comparison. It is notable that over 50 per cent of students enter computing courses at the university with either lower than DDM grades in BTECs, or from access, foundation, or other Level 3 courses.

Table 7: Entry qualifications for students taught in computing (full-time undergraduates), 2021-22 entrants compared with those of all OfS-registered providers[6]

Entry qualifications	Computing at all OfS-registered providers (%)	Computing at the University of Northampton (%)
A-levels (AAA or higher)	8.7	0
A-levels (ABB or higher)	6.0	0
A-levels (BCC or higher) or international baccalaureate	8.5	6.0
A-levels (CDD or higher)	3.9	1.6
A-levels (DDD or lower), other Level 3 (105 tariff points or higher) or two A-levels and one BTEC	10.9	15.9
HE-level qualifications on entry	10.1	11.0
BTECs (at least DDM), or one A-level and two BTECs	10.9	8.8
BTECs (lower than DDM)	15.1	24.2
Unspecified qualifications held by non-UK domiciled students	1.6	0
Access courses, foundation courses, or other Level 3 at 65 tariff points or higher	19.4	24.7
None, unknown or other entry qualifications	4.9	7.1

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[6] Source: Based on datasets used to build the OfS size and shape of provision data dashboard, as published on 12 April 2023. Restricted to 2021-22 entrants in the Computing CAH2 subject group taught at OfS-registered providers or the University of Northampton, respectively

24. **Staffing:** Data supplied by the university indicated that there were 36 staff. This includes associate lecturers and technical demonstrators delivering and supporting the delivery of computing and games courses delivered within the technology subject area.

25. **Leadership:** The university had undergone significant change in senior leadership over the last few years. A number of key senior positions were relatively recent appointments; these included the Vice-Chancellor (August 2022), Chief Operating Officer (January 2023) and Interim Academic Registrar (April 2022). The Deputy Vice-Chancellor, who joined the University in 2019, took on an interim Chief Operating Officer role during the period of appointing a new officer to this role.

26. At the time of the assessment, the university was in the process of defining and agreeing a new strategic plan, following the arrival of the current Vice-Chancellor.

27. In addition to disruption caused by coronavirus, the university experienced a major cyberattack in March 2021. This resulted in the extended unavailability of key systems (three weeks for some systems, and significantly longer for systems and resources judged to be at higher risk of a repeat attack), and loss of university data. The university worked with external experts to recover from the cyberattack and to enhance IT security, and adjusted assessment deadlines for affected students.

28. **Partnerships:** The faculty had a number of TNE partnership arrangements, which the OfS viewed as being out of scope for this investigation. At the time of assessment, these included five partnerships delivering the university's computing courses, based in Singapore, Egypt, Sri Lanka, Greece, and Nepal. There were no UK-based partners delivering the university's computing courses.

Assessment process

Information gathering

29. The assessment team gathered a range of information to determine whether there were possible concerns relating to requirements as set out in conditions of registration B1, B2, and B4. The team gathered information through an initial request for data from the university (fulfilled on 4 January 2023), and two site visits on 24 February 2023 and 28 to 29 March 2023.

30. During these visits, the team undertook:

    - a range of staff interviews (with academic and central professional service staff)

    - student interviews (including a range of students studying at Levels 4, 5 and 6)

    - a physical and digital facilities tour and review of records and documents.

31. The team was granted access to the virtual learning environment (VLE) – the Northampton Integrated Learning Environment (NILE) – from 22 February 2023 to 30 June 2023. It made further requests for information and data based on discussions with staff and students during both the initial site visit and the subsequent two-day site visit, as well as arising from its analysis of information already provided. The university fulfilled all requests in a timely fashion and provided the additional information and data on 22 February 2023, 27 February 2023, 27 March 2023, 16 May 2023, 26 May 2023, and 9 June 2023.

32. The team first reviewed general monitoring intelligence, including student outcomes data held by the OfS, and initial data provided by the university. From this information it determined to review all of the university's computing courses at Levels 4 to 7. This included courses listed in the current computing portfolio, as well as those no longer recruiting but in a teach-out phase. The breadth of coverage was necessitated by the fact that most computing modules at the University of Northampton were shared across a number of courses and that teaching staff were allocated to modules rather than courses.

33. Following initial analyses of data, the assessment team refined its focus to primarily considering computing courses within the faculty's technology subject area.

Assessment of matters relating to quality under ongoing conditions of registration B1, B2, and B4

Condition B1: Academic experience

34. The assessment team reviewed a range of information relevant to condition B1 (see Annex A for the full text), which is detailed through the discussion below.

35. In the assessment team's view, there were concerns that may relate to compliance with some of the requirements set out in condition B1.2, as follows:

> B1.2 Without prejudice to the principles and requirements provided for by any other condition of registration and the scope of B1.1, the provider must ensure that the students registered on each higher education course receive a high quality academic experience.
>
> B1.3 For the purposes of this condition, a high quality academic experience includes but is not limited to ensuring all of the following
>
> > d. each higher education course is effectively delivered

36. The assessment team also particularly noted the following definitions listed under B1.5:

> > d. "effectively delivered", in relation to a higher education course, means the manner in which it is taught, supervised and assessed (both in person and remotely) including, but not limited to, ensuring:
> >
> > > i. an appropriate balance between delivery methods, for example lectures, seminars, group work or practical study, as relevant to the content of the course; and
> > >
> > > ii. an appropriate balance between directed and independent study or research, as relevant to the level of the course.

37. The assessment team considered a range of information related to the delivery of courses at the University of Northampton in seeking to understand whether students were receiving a high quality academic experience, including whether courses were 'up-to-date' (B1.3.a), provided 'educational challenge' (B1.3.b), were 'coherent' (B1.3.c), and required 'students to develop relevant skills' (B1.3.e).

38. Based on the initial information reviewed in the scope of this quality assessment, the assessment team did not find any concerns that would relate to condition B1.3 a, b, c, or e. The review of information included:

- course and module specifications for the relevant courses across Levels 4 to 7

- course handbooks for the relevant courses across Levels 4 to 7.

39. This information is relevant to the courses under consideration being 'up-to-date', providing 'educational challenge', being 'coherent' and requiring 'students to develop relevant skills'.

40. During on-site visits, the assessment team met with students currently studying relevant courses, and with academic staff teaching on these courses. These meetings included discussion of topics relevant to courses providing 'educational challenge', being 'coherent', and requiring 'students to develop relevant skills'. The assessment team did not identify any concerns relating to condition B1.3 a, b, c or e during its on-site visits.

41. The assessment team considered a range of information related to the delivery of courses at the university, including a focused review of the VLE content, teaching materials, timetables, course and module structures, student module evaluations, student-staff liaison committee minutes, generic handbook information, student outcomes data, student entry data, National Student Survey (NSS) data, external examiner reports, quality improvement plans, and faculty analyses of performance. The team also held discussions with students, central support staff and academic teaching staff, in seeking to understand whether students were receiving a high quality academic experience and whether courses were effectively delivered.

42. The assessment team noted the recent redevelopment of the university's undergraduate computing courses, as described in paragraphs 18 and 19, and the pending introduction of new programmes in games and animation. The assessment team reviewed course information relevant to both the current undergraduate programmes, and those in a teach-out state.

43. The assessment team sought to understand the way in which courses were delivered at the university, staff views of the way in which students engaged with their courses, and, critically, students' views on the ease with which they were able to engage with their courses. The assessment team referred in particular to the use of the word 'appropriate' in definition B1.5.d with reference to the nature of the university's cohort of computing students.

Concern 1 (condition B1.3d): The delivery model is not effective for the nature of the undergraduate cohort

44. The assessment team's initial consideration of OfS and university datasets, in conjunction with data gathered through meetings with students and staff, identified a potential concern around the model of learning and teaching delivery at the university (B1.3d) and whether the way it was being applied to computing courses was ensuring a high quality academic experience, especially in relation to fully considering the needs of the student intake.

45. Initial OfS and university datasets reviewed (paragraphs 46-49) revealed relatively poor completion and continuation rates in computing when compared to the sector as a whole, and differences in attainment between students from different backgrounds.

46. The assessment team reviewed the latest student outcomes data [7] available at the point that the assessment began. For full-time, first degree computing students, considering three or four years of data combined showed that:

- The completion rate was 71.6 per cent, which gave very strong statistical evidence of performance below the B3 numerical threshold [8] of 75 per cent. There was also compelling statistical evidence that the provider's indicator was below the benchmark OfS have produced (80 per cent), which takes account of the profile of students and the provision being offered.

- The continuation rate was 83.5 per cent, above the B3 numerical threshold of 80 per cent but below their benchmark of 86 per cent.

- The progression rate was 74.6 per cent, above the B3 numerical threshold of 60 per cent but below their benchmark of 76 per cent.

47. Data provided by the university on student withdrawals showed that for full-time undergraduate computing students who enrolled between 2017-18 and 2021-22, 234 out of 716 (33 per cent) had so far withdrawn from their courses without receiving their target qualification aim, or a lower level qualification (such as an intermediate award). The predominant reasons for student withdrawals in the 120 withdrawals submitted for all computing students in the university's 2021-22 designated data body (DDB) student return were academic failure, students who left in bad standing, or those not permitted to progress (accounting for 50 students in total).

48. The assessment team identified significant differences in attainment between certain groups of computing students at the university:[9]

- For full-time first degree computing students qualifying in the 2019-20, 2020-21 or 2021-22 academic years, 71 per cent of students from IMD quintile 5 (areas of least deprivation) achieved a first class honours degree, compared with 24 per cent of students from IMD quintile 1 (areas of most deprivation). 45 per cent of students from IMD quintile 1 who qualified in those years achieved a lower second or third class degree.

- For full-time first degree computing students qualifying in the 2019-20, 2020-21 or 2021-22 academic years, 58 per cent of white students achieved a first class honours degree, compared with 19 per cent of black or Asian students.

- The assessment team noted that students who had moved to part-time study, while less likely to withdraw from their course, were more likely to receive a lower level award (e.g.

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[7] Source: OfS published continuation, completion and progression measures within the student outcomes dashboard from September 2022, using the 'Taught' view of a provider's student population. The latest version of the dashboard is available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-data-dashboard/. The subject area is defined by the Common Aggregation Hierarchy level 2 (CAH2). The four years were 2013-14 to 2016-17 inclusive for completion outcomes, 2016-17 to 2019-20 inclusive for continuation outcomes and the three years available for progression outcomes were 2017-18 to 2020-21 inclusive.

[8] See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/setting-numerical-thresholds-for-condition-b3/.

[9] Source: Internal OfS analysis of DDB Student return for computing students taught or registered at the University of Northampton.

lower than a bachelors' degree such as a certificate), compared with full-time students, as illustrated in Table 8.

Table 8: University data on student withdrawals and attainment of lower level awards for full-time students and those who had moved onto a part-time mode of study[10]

Full (FT) or part-time (PT)	Intake year	Number of students	Percentage who achieved first or 2.1	Percentage who received lower level qualification	Percentage withdrawal rate
FT	2017-18	83	42	0	45
PT	2017-18	32	19	44	25
FT	2018-19	119	54	2	28
PT	2018-19	32	25	35	9
FT	2019-20	132	32	14	38
PT	2019-20	34	9	15	21

49. In reviewing student outcomes data, the assessment team was cognisant of the potential impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on student attainment in the years 2019-20 and 2020-21. The assessment team therefore reviewed university datasets pre- and post-restrictions imposed during the pandemic. Withdrawal rates of full-time undergraduate computing students (to date of assessment) using university datasets had varied: at 45 per cent for those starting in 2017-18; 28 per cent in 2018-19; 38 per cent in 2019-20; 43 per cent in 2020-21; and 26 per cent in 2021-22. The assessment team noted that restrictions imposed during the pandemic did not appear to have affected withdrawal rates for full-time undergraduates; this was most likely due to changes in assessment regulations implemented by the university during this period. The assessment team thought that changes to the university delivery model described in paragraphs 55-90, which had led to a more concentrated pattern of assessment, amplified the difficulties that students faced trying to resit assessments that they had previously failed, and to manage new assessments.

50. In exploring student views on curriculum delivery in the 2022 NSS:

- 63 per cent of computing students at the university agreed with the statement 'My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth'

- 67 per cent agreed that 'The course is well organised and running smoothly'

- 66 per cent agreed with the statement 'The timetable works efficiently for me'.

51. The assessment team found, through analysing key themes in comments provided by students in the NSS, that 53 per cent of references to curriculum organisation were negative and 42 per cent were positive; 3 per cent of comments were mixed. Where feedback on

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[10] Source: OfS analysis of data provided by the university in June 2023.

course delivery was more negative, students were likely to mention poorly managed changes, challenging timetables, a poor course structure, and lack of support. Students who saw the curriculum more positively were more likely to comment on the freedom to explore ideas for oneself, while those who were less positive were more likely to note that they did not have enough direction from lecturers. This bipolar pattern of student responses suggested to the assessment team that the delivery of curriculum was not ensuring a high quality academic experience for all students.

52. The assessment team's analysis of student data raised several points for consideration relating to condition B1, and potentially other conditions of registration. The university identifies itself as a 'widening participation' provider; this means that it accepts students onto courses from a wide range of backgrounds, with a substantive number entering with low entry tariffs (paragraphs 20-23). A key question considered by the assessment team was the extent to which teaching and learning was designed to ensure that the needs of the nature of the cohort recruited were met. The assessment team reviewed student feedback to ascertain whether there were specific issues with the curriculum; it expected that this might have explained some of the reasons for the nature of the outcomes data outlined in previous paragraphs, as well as the sustained issues with student completions, withdrawals, shifts of students from full-time to part-time study, and large discrepancies in outcomes between students from specific backgrounds (ethnic minority, socioeconomic grouping).

53. Communications from the university with the assessment team explained that: 'as a general rule, it must be remembered that the courses that we are currently running are very different to the courses on to which these cohorts enrolled. Withdrawal rates are high, being over 30 per cent for 2017-18, 2019-20 and 2020-21 cohorts and students with a low entry tariff and lower IMD grouping seem to be particularly affected and that some of this was due to previous pathway approach'.

54. The assessment team acknowledged the recent changes to the course offer to try and tackle student continuation and progression (the university described this in documentation as a move to 'semesterised' delivery). However, it identified ongoing concerns from students about course delivery linked to the consequences of institutional changes in the delivery model for learning and teaching.

The impact of 'semesterised' delivery on students' experiences of learning and teaching

55. In 2021-22 the university altered the way in which course delivery operated for its undergraduate courses (i.e., how modules making up a course were distributed and delivered across the academic year). Expected benefits of this change stated by the university included:

- aligning undergraduate course provision with postgraduate course delivery that was already semesterised would create efficiencies

- it would allow students to concentrate on one subject at a time, which they preferred

- that there was evidence that semesterisation was already working well in some subjects.

56. The assessment team's view was that changes made to the way the teaching year was organised, which the university called 'semesterisation', may have led to course delivery that was ineffective.

57. The university's move to a new 'semesterised' delivery in essence meant that, whereas previously modules could be delivered and assessed across the academic year ('long thin delivery'), under the new 'semesterised' approach the university normally required modules to be delivered and assessed within a single semester ('short fat delivery'). The decision to move to this model of delivery was made by the university's Executive Management Team with the intention of supporting learning by allowing students to focus on a reduced number of subjects at a given time, and in theory improve module performance. Exemptions to these changes in how modules were delivered were available for certain modules such as dissertation modules, those containing placements, those with incompatible professional body requirements, or those too large to be delivered within a single semester.

58. The assessment team found reference to the impact of 'semesterisation' in multiple sources of information that they reviewed. The team therefore focused on the impact of the new 'semesterisation' process on students' experiences of learning and teaching and whether delivery of computing courses was effective (condition B1.3d). Much of the information reviewed by the assessment team was identified in information about undergraduate courses, and the assessment team, following a risk-based approach, focused its analysis on the undergraduate cohort (Levels 4 to 6).

59. The assessment team heard from module leads that modules that had previously been delivered across 26 weeks (two semesters) were now delivered across 13 weeks (a single semester), and that this had caused the delivery model to be squeezed in order to avoid leaving out relevant material. The view of one module lead was that this had resulted in students being allowed little time to reflect on one topic before starting the next. Another module lead told the assessment team that some new students did not have previous knowledge of computer programming, and that trying to develop their foundational skills in this area within 13 weeks was difficult.

60. Evidence from student-staff liaison minutes suggested that in some modules students were choosing not to submit assessments, as a direct consequence of the semester-based format. Instead, they were waiting for resits.

61. The university's undergraduate student-staff liaison committee minutes for computing courses (autumn 2021) confirmed that: 'The clear majority of second- and third-year students stated that they were unhappy with the module delivery reorganisation to a semester-based format.' A sample of feedback comments from students included in these minutes is illustrated below, and these comments were also reflected across different sources of information that the assessment team reviewed to gain a more holistic understanding of the student experience. Students' perceptions included:

- 'The students haven't had enough time to absorb/assimilate the new information effectively enough to produce work of a reasonable calibre.'

- 'In the old course structure, we would also have two or three weeks without classes to work on our assignments (e.g. Christmas and Easter) which gave us a chance to produce something meaningful.'

- 'Many students are saying they will simply not submit and wait for the resit.'

- 'Many who had arrived late, or had been absent from the university due to genuine illness for a week or two, are now disillusioned and feel unable to catch up already.'

- 'After the significant problems we have experienced in the last two years (e.g. COVID, cyberattack), the university comes over as completely heartless, imposing another change on us'.

62. The comments in paragraph 61 highlighted students' perceptions of the impact of changes to course delivery on their management of their learning where modules had not been sufficiently adapted to suit the new university delivery model. The students identified increased pressures in trying to learn module content in less time, with implications that they were not confident they could complete work to a suitable standard in the time allowed. The assessment team considered that these impacts would be felt most hard by students who had the least experience of academic study, and or had multiple responsibilities (e.g., part-time, mature students).

63. The consequences of the reduced delivery time on students' learning and attainment were mentioned across information sets reviewed by the assessment team (NSS, student module evaluations, student-staff liaison committee meeting minutes). Four of the 12 Level 6 module evaluations reviewed contained comments which indicated that students were unable to keep up with the pace of delivery. Students stated that, where previously (pre-'semesterisation') they had a year to work on modules, they now had only a matter of weeks, and they felt that this was insufficient time to cover and process course information. Some students interviewed by the assessment team also noted that the way the modules were now delivered resulted in them not being able to take breaks between semesters as they were too busy working on assignments.

64. Changes to the university delivery model impacted the length and distribution of teaching sessions. The university confirmed that, where teaching was allocated to four-hour blocks, teaching activities were varied across the time and that breaks were built in. Students' perceptions of teaching provision – as reflected in module evaluations and in discussions with the assessment team – were that it ranged from a four-hour lecture at one end of the scale, to them working on their own for most of the sessions at the other. In NSS surveys and student module evaluations, students were more likely to be unhappy about the change of length of teaching sessions from two-hour to four-hour teaching sessions per week per module. Most students who expressed dissatisfaction with four-hour long teaching sessions requested the return of two-hour sessions. Level 6 students in five module evaluations commented that they were not happy with four-hour sessions: '4 hours is too long to spend focused on one class', '4 hours would be fine if it was two 2 hour classes', '4 hours is too long to engage in a single subject for me; though I do like 2 hour classes back-to-back as was the case last year', '4h lectures feel too long.' One lecturer who the assessment team spoke to, in commenting on the fact that students feel overwhelmed by the length of lectures, had adapted delivery to a three-hour lecture and practical, along with an hour of online support; this was a common

delivery model in computing. As noted in paragraph 68, student satisfaction with the four-hour teaching blocks was very much dependent on the teaching approaches used in sessions and the fit of the approaches to students' needs.

65. In a sample of module evaluations reviewed by the assessment team, students also complained about not getting their four-hour entitlement in two of the nine Level 4 and 5 modules reviewed. The students stated that their teaching sessions always finished within 1.5 to 2 hours, and that this meant delivery by staff was too fast and left little room for learning concepts. However, in student-staff liaison minutes, an alternative student view was expressed: that in group project modules in games, a more focused two-hour delivery was preferred. Students who indicated that they were finding studying difficult found four-hour lectures, and studying alone, challenging, and wanted more hands-on support to answer their questions.

66. A review of timetables by the assessment team showed a mix of lengths of teaching sessions but confirmed that four-hour timetabled sessions were commonplace in some undergraduate courses, and three-hour timetabled sessions used predominately in others, with one hour of online support. The assessment team saw that in the BA Games Design course, all timetabled sessions at Levels 4 and 5 had four-hour durations. In the BA Games Art course, timetabled sessions for all but one module at Levels 4 and 5 had four-hour durations.

67. The assessment team also reviewed timetables for BSc Software Engineering, and BSc Computer Science. These two recently introduced courses currently have only Level 4 students enrolled on them, and are not using four-hour timetabled teaching sessions, but the assessment team noted that for both of these courses over 50 per cent of scheduled sessions at Level 4 have a duration of three hours. Games Design, first year students (Level 4) and second year students (Level 5) had complained in student-staff liaison minutes the year before that they were receiving eight hours of teaching sessions in one day, given that two four-hour teaching sessions were scheduled more or less back-to-back. Students had questioned the effectiveness of such concentrated delivery of teaching.

68. The assessment team's view was that the four-hour teaching sessions may not have been effective in catering for the nature of the student intake – which includes students with low entry tariffs. For example, as identified in paragraphs 20-23, many computing students enter the university with relatively low entry tariffs where longer length, and less frequent, teaching sessions may be less conducive for their learning than shorter sessions that would enable more frequent contact with lecturers. However, the team acknowledged that this was contingent on the design of the teaching activities within a specific four-hour slot.

69. The assessment team thought that the increasingly concentrated pattern of teaching delivery meant that any students unable to attend these sessions would miss a large portion of module content and would subsequently find it more difficult to catch up with study. While the university stated that NILE sites include support materials for catch-up if a session is missed, the assessment team found that the overall quality of materials on NILE was variable. For example, in 21 of 38 module sites reviewed on NILE, the assessment team found information available on all teaching sessions. However, in 17 of these modules the assessment team found that information on sessions was incomplete, and recordings of sessions (via collaborate) were only found in eight of the module sites reviewed. The assessment team

concluded that while most students would have full access to catch up materials, a significant proportion would not, and that the quality of materials was highly variable across the platform.

70. The assessment team reviewed university student experience forum (SEF) minutes and work published by university staff on changes to the university teaching delivery model. From these, it noted that there had been, and continued to be, challenges with implementation, and that these were evident across the university as a whole. An analysis by university staff in another faculty, the Faculty of Business and Law, for the university in June 2023, concluded that the university's new 'semesterised' approach had increased the pace of delivery, meaning that if students missed one calendar week (through late enrolment or other absence) this had a more marked impact on students' ability to keep up with their studies. The analysis identified several potential consequences on students' learning linked to the pace of delivery of teaching, including little time for students to process or reflect upon complex concepts, a magnified impact of poor or non-attendance, and pressures on students' time management skills. This affected students' ability to meet assessment timelines, resulting in a rise in the number of deadline extensions. The team considered that there was evidence that a number of the points raised by university staff from the Faculty of Business and Law were applicable to computing, as set out below (paragraphs 71-90).

71. Students raised concerns in module evaluations and NSS comments about the pace of delivery being too fast, and not having enough time to properly engage with modules. Students perceived having a larger workload for the second semester, however the games programming team stated that while there was a slight imbalance at Level 6, this was not the case at Levels 4 and 5.

72. Module leads confirmed to the assessment team that the new university teaching delivery model had created challenges with the pace of delivery, and that the new semester system was better suited to some modules than others. In the opinion of module leads, some modules' delivery needed to be 'long and thin' (meaning not concentrated within a semester). The resultant 'short fat delivery' was therefore less suitable for some modules and for some groups of students. Faculty quality improvement plans (to address where courses fell below the university's own baseline threshold levels of performance, in relation to areas such as student retention, progression into employment, and achievement), cited 'semesterisation' as having a negative impact on student outcomes. In contrast, students and staff in student-staff liaison minutes stated that they felt they benefited from the greater momentum of the new university teaching delivery model in some group project modules.

73. One module lead was more positive about the new 'semesterised' approach, suggesting to the assessment team that it offered more flexibility to students and greater coherence in course delivery. The module lead acknowledged that there had been challenges, and that fundamentally some module content had to be rewritten to accommodate the new delivery model. The assessment team was told that this work was ongoing, with some further modules having content repackaged to fit 'semesterisation' in preparation for the 2023-24 academic year. One module lead explained that the introduction of 'semesterisation' on his module had meant that too much work had to be covered in up to seven weeks of delivery, and that this had been resolved by splitting the content across a number of modules in years 2 (Level 5) and 3 (Level 6).

74. In courses where student achievement and retention issues were flagged as being below university set benchmarks, quality improvement plans (2022-23) in three games courses mentioned plans to restructure content into 20 credit modules, designed to be delivered and assessed within a single semester. Planned changes included earlier and more frequent assessments, with less weighting on the first assessment to lower the risk of non-retention and progression that the team felt was associated with existing larger 40 credit modules. How different courses and modules were tackling amendments to course delivery to better align with the university's 'semesterised' initiative was unclear to the assessment team. Improvement plans were only generated by the university where student performance metrics fell below the university's internally set thresholds. Few examples were provided to the team on how modules had adapted to the changing requirements of the new 'semesterisation' approach.

75. The assessment team found that course delivery had been amended to the new university teaching delivery model but, in many cases, without the necessary amendments to course and module content; instead, existing module content was being delivered in a much shorter period of time.

76. Computing students acknowledged in meetings with the assessment team, and in student module evaluations, NSS comments, and student-staff liaison committee minutes that, in many instances, they felt that they were not being given adequate time to consolidate their learning before moving on to new concepts or topics; this view was also reflected by some computing staff in faculty meetings, and in meetings with the assessment team. In the assessment team's view, this issue was likely to be particularly challenging for students with lower previous levels of academic attainment (such as many of those in the computing cohort at the university), as they may take longer to adapt to the demands of study in higher education and may be less well equipped to manage intensive modes of teaching delivery. The assessment team noted the effects were particularly evident on Level 6 students who were switched to the new university teaching delivery model for the final year of their course, at a time when they were trying to complete dissertations and other assignments.

77. The assessment team also looked at the impact of semesterisation' on students' experiences of assessment given multiple references to this by students.

78. The assessment team found that in computing, the modal number of assessments students completed was two per module (drawing on a sample of 26 modules across Levels 4 to 6, where 81 per cent of modules had two assessments per module). The assessment team reviewed programme and module information and found that undergraduate students were typically expected to complete three modules per semester. Each usually contained two summative assessments per module, resulting in six summative assessments per semester in total. The summative assessments could also comprise multiple assessment tasks as part of each assessment.

79. NSS student comments highlighted the students' views of the impact on their learning of how assessments were being scheduled and concentrated, as a result of changes to the course delivery model. Concerns about the impact of semesterisation on assessment were also referenced in 14 student comments across six of 12 of the sample module evaluations at Level 6, and in four comments from students across four of the nine sample module

evaluations at Levels 4 and 5. At Level 6, some students commented that there was not enough time to work on assessments to get them to a standard they were happy with, feeling that the timescales were unrealistic, and that module content was not suited to being covered in the time allocation. This was especially the case where students perceived that 'semesterisation' had squeezed their teaching into a much shorter period (as outlined in paragraphs 55-78). One student concluded that they felt their performance was affected by what they perceived as a university rather than a faculty issue.

80. The assessment team reviewed the timing of assessments to consider whether the scheduling of assessment activities was supportive of students' learning. The assessment team reviewed the BSc (Hons) Software Engineering (2022-23 delivery) assessment schedule to determine the bunching of assessment dates. The assessment team found that the way in which assessments were scheduled was not conducive to supporting all students' learning because the volume of assessments concentrated in each period was high. For example, for Level 4 students on the course, during the first year of study, students were expected to complete six time-controlled assessments, each of which with a two-hour duration, three assignments, and three projects, for a total of 12 pieces of summative assessment. Assignments and projects typically contained more than one activity, for example a report and a presentation.

81. Furthermore, the first phase of assessment took place early in students' courses where the amount of content and high pace of delivery had been noted. The assessment team's view was that the model of delivery meant students did not always have time to consolidate their learning prior to being required to submit assessments. This put pressure on students to complete work in narrow time frames and meant that they needed to focus on preparing for and completing summative assessments. It also meant they did not have the opportunity to engage fully with formative activities or engage in learning at a pace that was appropriate to their particular abilities or level of prior attainment.

82. Students told the assessment team that they felt that the volume of assessment meant they did not always have time to engage with formative assessments and other module activities at Levels 5 and 6. Students highlighted in meetings with the assessment team, and in module evaluations, the impact of having to manage multiple assessments at the same time, and in a shortened time frame:

- 'Insanely bulky assignments and game programmers have 3 other modules running at the same time. It's insane to have such a bulky assignment due in one month + dissertation + 2 other modules'.

- 'I think the semesterization (sic) impacts this assignment poorly as a lot of the ambitious ideas aren't given sufficient cooking time. Leading to poorly executed or underdeveloped ideas.' … 'the timescale due to semesterisation is unrealistic as this module is not very well suited to half a term'.

- 'Since I'm retaking some modules this year, I had to do 4 modules in one semester and then had at least 2-3 weeks to do each assignment whereas last year I had 6 weeks or so for each assignment'.

83. The minutes of the spring 2022 meeting of the technical computing and business computing student-staff liaison committee noted that students from Levels 4 to 6 reported difficulties with the turnover times between content delivery and assessment. Students told university staff that prior to 'semesterisation,' they always had several weeks (typically over holiday breaks) to consolidate their learning prior to assessment deadlines, but that in the new structure this was not always the case. In response to students, the university acknowledged that there had been some teething problems with the move to 'semesterisation', and that a review to try to make improvements was being conducted ahead of the 2022-23 academic year. The assessment team did not see the content or outcomes from this review. The assessment team was aware that some module leads had been able to move the timing of the first set of assessments, to give students more time to prepare for their submissions, but that this was not possible in all cases.

84. First year students on some games courses noted that they had found it difficult and pressurising to meet assessment deadlines when all the module assignments were due on the same date. The assessment team was also told that this was the reason some students were unable to submit work on time. Students in conversations with the assessment team stated that at times they were required to hand in three separate assessments on the same day; this could increase to four for students having to retake an assessment where they had failed it the first time (resit). However, the assessment team acknowledged that in the minutes of the student-staff liaison committee for games courses (April 2022) staff noted that the reason for deadlines being on the same day was largely in response to comments in previous committee meetings from students regarding the difficulty of keeping track of multiple, differing deadlines. While staff understood the difficulty some students had in managing multiple deadlines, they said this level of time management and organisation was expected of Level 4 undergraduate learners. The assessment team acknowledged that the faculty's move to setting all deadlines on the same day was in response to previous student feedback. However, the team's view was that, for this to work well, guidance on assessment requirements and feedback would need to be clear – which was not found to be the case across all modules (concerns 2 and 7). In making changes to the assessment timelines, the assessment team concluded that the faculty had not considered the needs of the cohort sufficiently, especially given that many students come into the university with a low entry tariff.

85. Students also told the assessment team that they felt the bunching of assessment deadlines had a particularly negative impact on weaker students in trying to manage multiple assessments in a shorter timeframe. Undergraduate module leads confirmed in interviews with the assessment team that the 'semesterised' approach had had a negative impact, especially on students with lower levels of academic attainment, given that there was now less time for these students to work with information.

86. Faculty senior leadership who the assessment team met with highlighted that there were considerable issues with students being able to manage the number of resits following the coronavirus restrictions, and that this was one of the reasons for lower rates of student continuation from one year to another. In interviews with the assessment team, students stated that if they failed modules and had to seek support from teaching staff, it presented challenges for them if support and answers were not provided immediately. Any delay made it harder to keep up with their studies, given the timelines students were working to because of

'semesterisation'. Failing modules could mean students might be required to undertake four modules (80 credits) in a single semester; students reported this compounded workload due to too many assessments at one time (assessment bunching). In the assessment team's view, the concentration of assessment timings would have affected those least able to manage them. If students had failed assignments once, they would then have had to cope with new assignments and resits within short spaces of time.

87. The assessment team's view was that the concentration of assessment combined with volume of content covered due to the increase in the pace of delivery, and insufficient adjustment of all modules to fit the new 'semesterised' model of delivery, demonstrated that computing courses at the university were not being effectively delivered. In the assessment team's view, these challenges would be especially acute for students who were not used to studying in higher education, or those undertaking work or caring responsibilities alongside their studies. The pace, and concentrated nature of teaching delivery, including assessment already outlined above, would have required students to be able to get up to speed with requirements very quickly. The scheduling of sessions in three- and four-hour weekly blocks would have also meant that if a student missed one or two sessions due to employment commitments it would have been hard for them to catch up.

88. The assessment team found the impact of the changes to the university teaching delivery model on students' learning were evident across Levels 4 to 6, with greater impact on some groups of students. The pandemic and the cyberattack compounded the impact on student learning. The latter also affected students' access to essential software needed to complete assessments (as discussed in concerns 3 and 4). In the assessment team's view, Level 6 students, in particular, had little time to adjust to a new system of teaching delivery. It appeared that the university had not fully considered the impact on student workload when moving to the 'semesterised' system. The volume of change for these students, and at the most important moment of their course,[11] demonstrated that courses were not delivered effectively.

89. The assessment team considered that the impact of 'semesterisation' had continued to make delivery less effective because the university had not adapted its modules sufficiently to suit the new university delivery model.

90. Students with a low entry tariff and lower socioeconomic grouping (IMD 1 and 2) seemed to be particularly affected. The assessment team's view was that the concentration of assessment timings, and pace of delivery, would have had greater impact on those students who would be most vulnerable to the impact of such changes (e.g. first in family to go to university, lower socioeconomic status, low entry tariff, students with disabilities). The university had not sufficiently addressed the nature of the cohort in factoring in changes to learning and teaching. The assessment team's view was that for undergraduate computing courses this resulted in course delivery that was not effective.

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[11] This moment was important given the relative weighting of modules towards their overall degree classification integral to the university's assessment algorithm.

Management of the 'semesterisation' change process

91. The assessment team identified issues related to the management of the 'semesterisation' change process. It noted that, due to the nature of certain courses, it was likely that some computing modules might have been more easily adapted to suit the university's revised teaching delivery model than others, as confirmed in meetings with computing staff. However, the scale of impact on computing students across all undergraduate years suggested that the process was not managed as effectively as it might have been. In the view of the assessment team, despite structures set up by the university to oversee changes to a semesterised delivery model, there did not appear to be sufficient consideration of the impact of the changes on students in the context of the nature of the subject, cohort, needs of specific student groups across different years, and modes of study (full-time versus part-time).

92. In student-staff liaison committee minutes, the majority of second (Level 5) and third year (Level 6) students had confirmed they were unhappy with module delivery being switched to a 'semesterised' format. One student expressed dissatisfaction that they felt the delivery method had changed from what was advertised, with no consultation. In discussing university-wide changes in a meeting with the assessment team, senior leadership acknowledged that the university had made lots of changes in learning and teaching without the institutional processes to embed them. Plans were being developed to address the issues, including significant work on staff development.

93. Computing staff were aware of student dissatisfaction with 'semesterisation', as documented in student-staff liaison committee minutes across courses. The course team for undergraduate computing courses acknowledged concerns from students across all undergraduate years in 2021. The course team said that they were genuinely saddened to hear that the new structure had caused such distress to so many students, and that this would be referred to the management team for further comment. It was evident that some computing staff were concerned about the switch to 'semesterisation' and thought the university should stop doing it. Staff cited the reduced time students had to complete assignments, and challenges for first year students undertaking four-hour teaching blocks.

94. Computing staff who were more positive about 'semesterisation' acknowledged that there was room for improvement. Staff stated that it had not worked well for all modules, and that assessments and submission points needed to be adjusted. At the January 2023 away day, a word cloud generated from the faculty staff indicated that 'semesterisation' was an ongoing challenge. The assessment team noted that many computing staff were still repackaging module content into something that fitted better with the revised delivery model.

95. The assessment team also noted that 'semesterisation' was an ongoing issue at university level, as confirmed in the university's student experience forum (SEF) minutes in January 2022. These minutes confirm 'that 'semesterisation has been put back to amber status from green status due to several 'snagging' issues which had been identified and contained. These snagging issues related to the bunching of assessments and challenges around Examination Board timings. The SEF recognised that positive outcomes from 'semesterisation' were also being identified such as students and staff benefitting from the inter-semester breaks.' However, the assessment team found that for computing students this did not always seem to be the case, as students needed to use the time to study (paragraphs 63, 83). The forum also

suggested that 'semesterisation may need some modules to be redesigned, particularly in relation to moving away from 50/50 assessment weightings'.

96. The assessment team found that, despite university processes being in place to oversee the implementation of semesterisation, insufficient attention had been given by faculty leadership to ensuring that all computing courses had been adapted to better fit with the 'semesterised' delivery model. For example, evidence provided by the university to the assessment team stated that it saw module delivery changes from 'long thin' to 'short fat' as an 'administrative process', demonstrating to the assessment team that insufficient consideration had been given to the experience of students studying these modules. The role of module leads in the process was unclear as the faculty did not have a job description for them. Undergraduate and postgraduate programme leads told the assessment team it was not their responsibility to review and quality assure individual modules, as this was the responsibility of a newly appointed overarching subject leader.

97. The scale of the impact of 'semesterisation' on staff and students suggested to the assessment team that the university had not invested sufficient resource, including time and training in preparing faculties for the change when it was introduced. That module leads had no job description showed that greater clarity in role responsibilities was needed at the module level to deliver improved oversight. University senior leadership explained to the assessment team that faculty leadership previously had not had the resources to plan learning and teaching effectively, and that in the move to Waterside the university had not placed enough emphasis on academic leadership in terms of ensuring sufficient staff numbers and training for staff. Recent investment to address this, and to improve the academic experience for students in computing, had included:

- the appointment of a deputy dean and head of subject

- job descriptions for head of department and heads of subject roles

- programme leads to enhance the quality of oversight of learning and teaching in computing.

98. In the assessment team's view, these changes should have helped to ensure greater oversight of quality and the ability to plan and manage changes at the course level.

99. The assessment team was of the view that there had been oversight of how changes to courses and modules had been managed, to align with 'semesterised' delivery (paragraph 96), but that this had been insufficient as it had not addressed the fundamental delivery issues identified. The lack of leadership oversight meant there had not been appropriate adaptation of modules across all courses, and this resulted in ineffective delivery, with students needing to cover a high volume of work in a shorter time and the bunching of assessments. These delivery issues meant that not all students had experienced a high quality academic experience.

100. In summary, it was the assessment team's view that the way 'semesterisation' was managed – both centrally and in faculty – contributed to the fact that not all students received a high quality academic experience, and that this was especially problematic for certain groups of students. The impact of the change in delivery was an ongoing issue because very few modules were able to demonstrate how they had adapted to the reduced time available. The

assessment team noted recent changes to faculty leadership that were intended to enable more effective oversight and support for module leads in developing modules to align better with the demands of the new learning and teaching schedule.

Concern 2 (condition B1.3d): Quality of information about assessment

101. The assessment team identified a potential concern around students' access to, and understanding of, assessment requirements that might suggest that computing courses were not being effectively delivered and students were not receiving a high quality academic experience. The team considered NSS comments, and wider data sources that included:

    - university guidance on the assessment grading system

    - course handbook information, programme and module specifications

    - assessment briefs, including rubrics

    - interviews with staff and students

    cross referencing with datasets in concerns 1, 3-7.

102. While the quality of information about assessment is relevant to the operation of effective assessment practice itself (condition B4), the assessment team was of the view that the way in which information about assessment is used by staff means that it is relevant to the design and effective delivery of courses. It is integral to learning activities and how assessment is designed within a course. The assessment team therefore considered that the quality of information about assessment was relevant to condition B1.3.d because the manner in which a course is assessed is a component of the effective delivery of a high quality academic experience.

103. The assessment team focused attention on the nature of information available to students about assessment requirements following interviews with students. Students in these interviews suggested that information about assessment was often unclear or contradictory. Students need to be clear about the requirements of assessment and the processes associated with them including the nature of course and module learning outcomes, and how these are assessed, to best support their learning. Clarity regarding how assessment works is important for all students, and especially for those students who have come into higher education from less traditional education pathways, as was the case with many of the computing students at the University of Northampton (paragraphs 20-23).

104. Student non-submission rates for Level 4 computing students over a sustained period (Table 9) suggested to the assessment team that a considerable number of students were struggling with the demands of assessment (i.e., understanding what the assessment requirements were, and being able to complete assessments in the time allocated (concern 1)). The assessment team thought that if students did not understand assessment requirements, this could result in high non-submission rates. The assessment team was cognisant of the potential impact of the coronavirus pandemic on student attainment in the years 2019-20 and 2020-21. The team therefore studied university datasets pre- and post-restrictions imposed

during the pandemic and took the potential impacts of the coronavirus pandemic into account when considering these datasets.

105. Table 9 includes information from CSY technology modules integral to Computing, Business Computing and Games courses; Science SPO modules within Sports and Exercise courses, and 3DD modules within Art and Design courses. It indicates that student non-submission rates in computing have averaged approximately 19 per cent over the last five years, with a peak of 29 per cent of non-submissions in 2020-21, and reducing to 15 per cent in 2021-22 (drawing on university provided data). Student overall pass rates (where non-submissions are included) in this period have varied from 69 per cent (2017-18), 75 per cent (2018-19), 72 per cent (2019-20), 60 per cent (2020-21), recovering to 79 per cent in 2021-22.

Table 9: University data for Level 4 modules – student outcomes data for CSY (Computer Science), SPO (Esports) and 3DD (3D Design modules with Art and Design and Design and Photography) computing modules, for 2017-2022 cohorts

Assessment outcome	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Fail	131 (8.6%)	202 (11.4%)	163 (9.7%)	182 (11%)	109 (5.7%)
Non-submission	345 (22.6%)	236 (13.3%)	307 (18.2%)	481 (29.1%)	289 (15.2%)
Pass	1,049 (68.7%)	1,334 (75.2%)	1,214 (72.1%)	988 (59.4%)	1,502 (79.1%)
Mitigating circumstances	2 (0.1%)	3 (0.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	**1,527**	**1,775**	**1,684**	**1,651**	**1,900**

Source: University datasets.

106. Senior faculty leadership acknowledged that students were arriving less well prepared for higher education or independent study than previous cohorts. That so, the assessment team's view was that it would have been particularly important for there to be clear and explicit guidance about assessment to support students in understanding what they needed to do, and what questions they needed to ask – all of which the assessment team saw as integral to the effective delivery of a high quality academic experience.

107. In analysing NSS comments the assessment team found that 18 per cent of the core themes raised by students related to assessment and feedback (n = 42); 81 per cent of these comments were negative, compared with 19 per cent that were positive. In drilling down to where students expressed least satisfaction, the assessment team identified two key concerns:

a. students' access to clear and accurate information about assessment

b. the quality of feedback in supporting students' learning (the latter of which is reviewed in concern 7).

108. It was clear to the assessment team that students wanted clarity about what they needed to do to meet the assessment requirements of a course. For example, all the first-year technical computing and business computing representatives (Level 4) in university student-staff liaison committee meetings reported that having access to accurate information about their assessments was essential to their success on their courses.

109. Undergraduate programme leads explained that students not finishing assessments (i.e., non-submission of work) was not related to the assessment itself, but that it was a whole-institution issue. Programme leads elaborated that, at Level 4, a lot of students did not know what to do, as they were not aware of the focus of their courses. In the assessment team's view, students' lack of awareness of what they needed to do to succeed in assessment had been related to the quality of guidance they were receiving about assessment.

110. The assessment team noted that student responses to the NSS question: 'The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance' had improved from 70 to 80 per cent between 2020 and 2022. However, from reviewing a range of sources (including NSS comments) the assessment team identified several concerns relating to students' access to information about assessment which it thought could have been impacting student continuation, completion and progression (paragraphs 46-49). University senior leadership staff confirmed in discussion with the assessment team that while NSS scores in relation to assessment were improving, qualitative responses from students in the NSS and wider sources suggested assessment and feedback was a key concern for computing, and for the university as a whole. The concerns identified by the assessment team included, but were not limited to:

a. difficulties in accessing information about assessment and the complexity of grading

b. the quality of rubric guidance

c. lack of alignment of assessment information.

Information about assessment and the complexity of the grading system

111. The assessment team identified, from discussions with students and staff, that the university's assessment grading system was difficult to make sense of. Module leads in meetings with the assessment team acknowledged that the university assessment grading system provided an 'extra layer of complexity' that made it more difficult for students.

112. Faculty senior leadership explained that the university assessment grading approach was based on letter grades for undergraduate and postgraduate assessments (A+ to G). From information available on the university's website at the time of the investigation, the assessment team identified that the university's grading criteria distinguished between the levels making up a specific grade (e.g. A+, A, and A-).

113. The assessment team found that navigating information on the grading system was difficult. Information about the university's generic assessment criteria (indicative standards for different levels of performance) was hard to find on the VLE, and also difficult to locate in undergraduate and postgraduate handbooks due to inaccuracies in the materials available.

For example, page 17 of the 'Undergraduate Student Handbook' stated that the generic grade criteria were in Appendix V of the handbook, but the assessment team found that Appendix V was about the university's approach to timetabling. Page 23 of the same handbook stated that generic grade criteria were in Appendix III but this appendix contained the Framework for Undergraduate Qualifications. The generic grade criteria were not in the handbook. The 'Postgraduate Student Handbook' also referred to generic grade criteria in Appendix I, but the assessment team could not find the university assessment criteria in this handbook either.

114. The assessment team raised the difficulty in accessing the university assessment criteria with faculty senior leadership. They said it was not their responsibility to check the accuracy of handbooks as this was the responsibility of senior staff who had overall responsibility for university education strategy.

115. Faculty staff confirmed that the online learning environment acted as the handbook for students but in looking at a sample of 38 computing modules on the VLE, the assessment team could not find links to university assessment criteria, and they could not be easily found on the university website. The assessment team had reviewed online information on the university assessment criteria in February 2023 and had highlighted issues to faculty senior leadership. When the team tried to access the information in June of the same year it was no longer accessible. The assessment team concluded that students would have had difficulty in accessing information and this could have resulted in course delivery not being effective: core assessment information should be easily accessible to staff and students so that they can check the appropriateness of learning activities to assessment requirements. For example, whether course design and delivery are enabling students to demonstrate the relevant knowledge and skills as set out in course learning outcomes.

116. The assessment team's view was that as part of effective delivery students should be clear about how the assessment grading system worked so that they could make informed decisions about where and how to focus their efforts. The assessment team found the way the university calculated course grades was confusing, as described in assessment regulations and undergraduate and postgraduate module handbooks. This was because for modules with two or more pieces of assessment, grades were calculated by converting the letter grade (A+ to G) for each assessment into a numeric value of zero to 25 and then adjusting this value to account for the weighting of the assessment to the overall module grade. The weighted value for each assessment would then be combined, resulting in a total numeric value of between zero and 30 and students would then need to convert this back into an overall module grade for A+ to G. Senior faculty leadership explained that in calculating overall course grades the university worked 'with both mean and median averages, in 80 per cent the student outcomes are the same, where there is difference students get the higher outcome. This is all set out for students in the handbook, but it is not easy to navigate your way through.'

117. However, the university senior leadership team, when asked about the complexities of the assessment grading system, said the intention was that the current approach would be replaced with a percentage system using the mean and not the median in assessing course performance but it was not made clear to the assessment team when this would be implemented. This may help resolve issues with the complexity of the system.

Quality of rubric guidance to support students' understanding of the knowledge and understanding, and skillsets required

118. The assessment team reviewed programme and module specifications outlining the learning outcomes students were expected to achieve, and assessment briefs outlining assessment tasks and how marks were awarded. In sampling 38 modules on the VLE (a 56 per cent sample of core computing modules), the assessment team was able to access and review assessment briefs for 29 of these (representing a 43 per cent sample of core computing modules). The assessment team identified that the information about assessment that was available to students was variable in quality. In nine of the modules reviewed, the assessment team found that the assessment briefs lacked detail, and contained information that could be viewed as contradictory. In the assessment team's view, it would have been difficult for students to have a clear understanding of assessment requirements and how to organise their studying most effectively in some modules. Students had reported in module feedback and meetings with the assessment team that the timing and ways in which assessment information was presented meant they did not have full oversight of what learning was required. This meant that students could not always focus their learning appropriately, which in the assessment team's view was an example of delivery not being effective.

119. In nine of the 29 modules where assessment briefs could be found, there was no detailed rubric explaining how marks were awarded, and for different levels of achievement in relation to the assessment criteria for specific assessment tasks. In 18 of the 29 modules sampled, the assessment team found rubrics were poorly developed, making it difficult for students to understand what they needed to do to achieve a specific grade for a piece of work. The assessment team found limited explanation of the relevant knowledge, understanding, and skills that a specific module was testing. The most detailed assessment briefs (n = 3) provided assessment criteria explaining the knowledge, skills and attributes students needed to demonstrate to ensure successful achievement of learning outcomes. The briefs also included details of what distinguished performance in one grade compared with another, and for the different areas of knowledge and skills being assessed. In summary, the assessment team noted that there were very few high quality rubrics, meaning that it would have been difficult for students to have a good understanding of what was required.

120. The assessment team reviewed module evaluations that highlighted significant variations in the extent to which students agreed with the statement 'assessment criteria used in marking had been made clear in advance'. In the university's module evaluations, students rate various statements about their learning and teaching experience on a 1 to 5 Likert scale, with 1 representing 'definitely agree' and 5 'definitely disagree'. The assessment team found that in nine of the 21 module evaluations across Levels 4 to 6, students' ratings for the highest levels of agreement with the statements (ratings 1 and 2) were 65 per cent or less. In the cases of these nine modules, a third or more of students did not find assessment criteria had been clear to them. Student ratings about having clear assessment criteria in advance of assessment varied from 100 per cent to 30 per cent, demonstrating significant variations across modules in students' levels of agreement with the clarity of assessment criteria.

121. In four of the sample module evaluations at least 50 per cent of students did not strongly agree (ratings 1 and 2) that the assessment criteria used in marking had been made clear in

advance. Students' lack of understanding of assessment requirements was also evidenced in the assessment team's review of student complaints 2019 to 2022. Here, eight complainants said they were not clear about assessment processes and assessment outcomes. The assessment team noted that three of the eight student complaints were upheld, two were not upheld, and the outcomes of the other three were unclear from the information provided. The assessment team's view was that this inconsistency in how students viewed the clarity of assessment criteria and processes could have meant that, in some modules, delivery was not effective.

122. NSS comments (n = 11) also identified the lack of clarity in information about assessment as an issue for some students. Student comments said that information to support understanding of assessment came too late to be helpful, and that marking criteria in assignment briefs was unclear about what was required to achieve higher grades. One student commented that they only became clear about the assessment criteria after their work had been marked, which was too late for them to be able to do anything about it to improve their work.

123. Some students commented in NSS feedback that it was not clear in the assessment rubrics what was required to do well, and especially in relation to achieving grades of B– and above. At the top of the marking scale, students wanted to know what distinguished A+ and A- grades. In exploring this feedback from students, the assessment team reviewed a sample of approximately 56 per cent of core computing modules (paragraph 118) and found only one module that differentiated requirements for A+, A, and A-, and few modules were found that distinguished between the different F level grades. The assessment team found that, even in modules which differentiated between A+ to A-, the actual descriptors provided gave students little idea of what distinguished one grade category from another (concern 7). In NSS comments and student interviews, some students had stated that a lack of assessment guidance around what distinguished a plus from a minus grade was demoralising for those keen to achieve high grades.

124. The team reviewed a stratified sample of module assessment briefs across Levels 4 to 6 (27 assessment briefs from 17 modules). These showed that the assessment information provided to students would not have given them a clear idea of the level at which they needed to perform, or of the relationships between the assessment task and the knowledge, skills and attributes that would need to be demonstrated. This finding was corroborated by a wider review of 35 per cent of computing modules on the VLE by the assessment team where assessment briefs were found to be weak in 37 per cent of modules reviewed. The assessment team considered that the lack of guidance within rubrics was not helping students' understanding of the standards required.

125. In addition to their own review of module assessment briefs, the assessment team also reviewed a sample of 17 external examiner reports. The assessment team found few comments from external examiners that referenced marking schemes and rubrics explicitly but found that where there were comments on this, they were largely positive. However, the majority of the external examiner reports did not contain feedback relating to the quality of marking schemes or rubrics. As a result, the assessment team concluded that the information contained in the external examiner reports was limited, in so far as it related to their exploration of the quality of assessment rubrics.

126. Typically, rubrics provide a steer to students on the knowledge and understanding and skills that they need to demonstrate to meet course learning outcomes. The assessment team found that the quality of information given to students about assessment requirements was sometimes insufficient to support students' learning. Senior faculty staff provided evidence to the assessment team of how they had mapped course learning outcomes in computing to subject benchmark statements, but the assessment team could not see how this was translated at module levels with students and staff. This lack of a clear translation of how course learning outcomes mapped to module learning outcomes raised questions for the assessment team about how clear it was for students to know where and how to focus their learning. Without consistent and explicit guidance on the knowledge and skills being assessed, in the assessment team's view it would be especially difficult for students entering the university with low entry tariffs.

127. The assessment team identified that the standard for the pass level (D grades) was set very low in some modules, with the descriptors provided seeming more indicative of a fail rather than a pass grade. For example, the assessment team found emphasis in the grade descriptors on students failing to provide evidence of meeting the assessment criteria rather than meeting it, albeit at a basic (threshold) level. Specific examples included:

- In one module a pass grade descriptor included: 'Basic evidence … Contribution minimal/limited… The team failed to cover assessment evidence for … presentation/did not present or did not upload evidence for milestone upload to pass level…'. The assessment team's view was that this descriptor was set at a very low level and did not suggest a pass grade.

- In the same module outlined in the bullet point above, a pass grade was described as a 'minimal contribution with the team failing to cover assessment evidence.' The assessment team did not understand how the work could be a pass grade in the context described, as it normally would be assumed that a student would need to provide sufficient evidence for a pass.

- In a second module, a pass grade was delineated by the descriptor: 'A poor standard 3D character model and textures have been produced. The work often strays from restrictions of the brief and lacks the visual or technical qualities needed.' Again, to the assessment team, if assessed work lacks the qualities needed, it is hard to see how the work is a pass.

128. The assessment team also found examples in modules where students were told that 'An A+ requires exceptional work which goes above, and beyond which is outlined here in criteria.' This instruction is provided for a Level 4 module. In the assessment team's view, it would be especially difficult for a student to work out the specifics of the knowledge, understanding and skillsets required, given their relative lack of experience of assessment in higher education.

129. In a second year (Level 5) module reviewed by the assessment team, the module lead told the assessment team that the learning outcomes 'were reflected in the rubrics and that students were pushed to use these'. However, while the assessment team found clear instructions for students on what the components of what the task should be, and how reports should be organised, the rubric had no information on the characteristics of what learning outcomes looked like at different levels of performance. The assessment team found the

rubric identified six areas of activity that needed to be demonstrated, and a blank rubric giving no indication of what constituted 'excellent, good, satisfactory, needs more work, needs much more work'. The assessment team found that the rating scale provided did not align with the language of the university assessment grading descriptors.

130. The assessment team found that information for students was limited on the high level knowledge and understanding, cognitive practice and transferable skills in some computing modules. This would have been expected in terms of alignment with sector-recognised standards.[12] It was difficult to see how some of the learning outcomes outlined in course specifications were being covered at the module level. The assessment team could not find reference to Level 6 learning outcomes such as critical analysis skills in some modules where programme specifications had indicated that these skills would be tested. There was also a lack of guidance for students at the module level on how they could meet some of the higher-level knowledge and skillsets referenced in the course-level learning outcomes.

131. The assessment team looked in detail at five Level 6 modules. It found that rubrics gave little guidance on the specific knowledge and skills required as would be expected in line with the sector-recognised standards. They also made little reference to the higher-level analysis and evaluation skills that the course learning outcomes indicated these modules would test.

132. In summary, the assessment team's view was that the lack of information provided to students about the knowledge and skills required, and the standard at which the assessment descriptors were set, in some modules, made it difficult for students to understand how to focus their learning.

133. The assessment team's view was that the lack of detail provided to students on how assessment tasks related to course-level learning outcomes would have been especially difficult for those students entering university with relatively low entry tariff. Research in this area reveals the relationship between prior academic achievement and learning outcomes within higher education,[13] and the need to provide sufficient support for the nature of the student intake to maximise their access to assessment processes. Faculty senior leadership had explained that many Level 4 students struggled with their studies in their first year (as confirmed in continuation data). The assessment team found that the lack of specific information about the knowledge and skills required in some modules meant that students did not always have the information they needed to inform their learning. In the assessment team's view, the relative lack of guidance in some assessment briefs meant that assessment was not designed and delivered in a way that best supported students' understanding of assessment requirements or ensured that they received a high quality academic experience.

134. In summary, the assessment team's view was that course delivery was not effective because assessment information was not clear or consistent. The assessment team identified that the quality of assessment information in assessment briefs was weak in nine out of 24 modules that they reviewed. A substantial number of rubrics (62 per cent) the assessment team

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[12] See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/sector-recognised-standards/.

[13] See Schneider and Preckel, 2017, available at https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-12895-001.

examined across courses lacked sufficient details to support student understanding of assessment requirements.

Alignment of assessment information

135. The assessment team identified a lack of alignment between university assessment grade descriptors and how they were being implemented at module level which they considered could undermine students' access to a high quality academic experience.

136. The university undergraduate grade criteria descriptors described different standards of achievement in relation to learning outcomes as follows:

- A grades (exceptionally distinguished to threshold distinguished)

- B grades (strong merit to threshold merit)

- C grades (highly commended to threshold commended)

- D grades (highly satisfactory to bare pass)

- F grades (some evidence of addressing learning outcomes to negligible evidence)

- G grades had various descriptors within the university assessment grading system, dependent on whether the issue was late submission, limited content submitted, academic misconduct etc.

137. The assessment team found variations in how some module teams were interpreting the university's academic regulations and assessment criteria grading bands across Levels 4 to 7 in assessment briefs reviewed on the VLE, and from the sample provided by the university. The assessment team was of the view that the university assessment grade descriptors were not high quality. They lacked information and alignment with sector-recognised standards guidance.[14] They also used grade boundaries at the module level inconsistently.

138. The expectation of the assessment team was that university academic regulations, university assessment grade descriptors, and module level assessment criteria would have been consistent. This was not always found to be the case. For example, the assessment team found one module at masters' level included a D level grade; the Academic Regulations 2022-23 for postgraduate awards stated that there was no D grade for postgraduate work.

139. The assessment team found some modules had adopted the university's letter system, with some adopting a letter based grading approach, differentiating with +/- (e.g., A+, A, and A-), whereas others did not appear to differentiate within overall grades within the rubrics provided. The assessment team also found that module rubrics were inconsistent in their use of the language of the university assessment grade descriptors. In a focused sample of 24 computing module rubrics, the assessment team found that nine of these did not follow the university assessment grading system.

140. The assessment team found the terminology applied to grade classifications varied within and across rubrics. For example, the use of the term 'satisfactory' was used for both C and D grades, where the university assessment grade descriptors suggested satisfactory denotes a D grade. The assessment team also found the descriptor of 'satisfactory' being used for an

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[14] See: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/sector-recognised-standards/.

F+ grade, which according to the university grading system, is a 'marginal fail'. The assessment team's view was that these inconsistencies and errors in how grading boundaries and terminology were being used exemplified ineffective course delivery. They had the potential to undermine the efficacy of the assessment process and confuse students as to what standards were expected.

141. In some computing modules, the assessment team found grade boundaries in rubrics had been amalgamated or compressed. There were also instances where terms used to describe specific levels of performance within the university assessment grade descriptors were being used inconsistently at the module level. The assessment team thought this would be confusing for students to understand. Information about assessment and grading should be interpreted consistently in order for delivery to be effective. For example, the assessment team saw that different grades were combined, such as, C+, C, C- and D+ and D under the descriptor 'satisfactory', but in the university assessment grading system C grades were deemed 'sound quality/commended', and D grades 'satisfactory'. In another example, the assessment team found D- and F+ grouped in one category, whereas according to the university's assessment grading system D- was a pass grade, and F+ a fail grade. In another module, C+ to D+ grades were grouped together to denote a satisfactory grade but in the university grading system these were two distinct grading categories. The assessment team's view was that it would be difficult for students to gain an accurate understanding of what was required for different levels of performance, given the different ways in which the university grading system was being used in computing.

142. The assessment team found that some computing modules' assessment briefs used percentages and others letter grades. It was, consequently, difficult to understand, for assignments that contained several deliverables each requiring a grade, how the final grade for an assignment was assigned. The assessment team's view was that the different ways in which modules were addressing the assessment criteria would make it difficult for students to understand clearly what they needed to do.

143. In summary, the assessment team found that the different ways in which the university assessment grade descriptors (how each level of performance was described) were being interpreted and applied in modules would make it very difficult for students to have a clear understanding of the standards of work required.

Inconsistent and inaccurate assessment information

144. Following up on student feedback that navigating assessment requirements was difficult (i.e., in NSS data, module evaluations and interviews with the students), the assessment team reviewed the alignment between course and module learning outcomes, assessment tasks, and assessment criteria. The assessment team looked at nine out of 10 computing courses and nine modules that were taught within these courses at undergraduate level (esports was excluded as few issues had been identified within this course from review of documentation). The assessment team's view was that a high quality academic experience required consistency between course and module learning outcomes.

145. In the view of the assessment team, a lack of alignment between different elements of assessment would make it harder for students to understand the assessment requirements

and result in ineffective delivery of courses. Lack of alignment could also potentially undermine the reliability of assessment if what students are being assessed on did not relate closely to the programme learning outcomes (paragraph 158).

146. The assessment team found it difficult to navigate course assessment information provided to students from its review of documentation and information available via the VLE. The assessment team found that the ways in which the programme level learning outcomes (PLOs) were described compared with module learning outcomes (MLOs) made it quite difficult in some cases to see how the MLOs addressed the PLOs. PLOs and MLOs differentiate between subject knowledge, understanding and application, and the university's changemaker and employability skills, but used different numbering and letter systems to identify subject knowledge and skills. For example, in PLOs 'A1-A8' were used for subject knowledge and 'B1-3' for changemaker and employability skills (the number is dependent on the number of learning outcomes). At the module level these knowledge and skills are described on a continuous letter scale (e.g., a-f). So, for example, in one module, subject knowledge, understanding and application was described in eight PLOs numbered 'A1-A8' and changemaker and employability skills were outlined in 'B1-4.' The related module specification had six MLOs denoted as 'a-c' for knowledge, understanding and application, and 'd to f' for changemaker and employability skills.

147. Programme specifications identified the nature and number of PLOs that were assessed in each of the modules of the course. However, the assessment team found only two out of nine modules and the associated 15 assessment briefs reviewed where the specified nature and number of PLOs and MLOs aligned. The assessment team noted loose mapping of PLOs and MLOs but thought it would be difficult for students to map the relationships between them, and it was evident that some PLOs had not been covered in MLOs that programme specifications stated would have been.

148. The assessment team found that MLOs often did not cover the higher-level critical analysis and evaluation aspects of the PLOs. The assessment team acknowledged that other modules within a different course (not examined as part of the sample) could be covering some of the higher-level outcomes not mentioned in the modules examined. However, the team noted that the course programme specifications suggested that these were covered in the modules reviewed, and the module specifications could not demonstrate evidence to support this. Of particular concern was where Level 6 modules were not covering the higher-level learning outcomes suggested in the programme specifications.

149. The assessment team found several errors in current course materials which it considered would be unhelpful for students in trying to understand the requirements of assessment. For example, in reviewing information about BA Games Art, the assessment team found issues in modules across Levels 4 to 6 as set out in the examples below:

Example module in BA Games Art

- There was an error in the module specification (MLOs 'e and f' were written down as the same thing).

- The module specification stated that for all (emphasis added) assessment tasks students should meet MLOs 'a to f'. However, the assessment brief explained this differently stating that the first assignment measured 'b, d, e'; the second assignment measured learning outcomes 'a, e, f'; and the third assignment measured learning outcomes 'c, d, e.' The assessment team noted that it was entirely feasible for different assessments to focus on different learning outcomes if the specified learning outcomes were covered within the assessments for the module; the concern was that the module information contradicted the information provided in the assessment brief.

- Assessment brief 2 was wrongly named as assessment brief 1.

- Assessment brief 1 omitted learning outcome 'd' in the description of what learning outcomes needed to be met, but MLO 'd' was shown in the rubric.

- Assessment brief 2 said it mapped to learning outcomes 'a, e, f', but only provided information in the rubric for learning outcomes a and f.

Example module BA Games Design

- In the assessment brief for one module it stated: 'This assessment corresponds to the following "Learning Objectives" as detailed in the "Module Specification" document: Knowledge & Understanding: a, b; Subject Skills: e; Key Skills: g, f.' However, the assessment team found that the module specification outlined MLOs 'a-d', and that there was no e, f, and g.

150. In summary, the assessment team identified two core issues with how assessment information was being conveyed to students. First, course and module information did not align. Second, course information contained significant errors, which the assessment team concluded would confuse students.

151. The assessment team observed that the quality of assessment information provided to students was inconsistent. It found the following concerns:

- typing errors

- the complexity of the university's assessment grading system and processes

- contradictory assessment information in programme and module learning outcomes

- variations in the quality of rubrics (with many rubrics not giving a clear indication of the knowledge and skills students needed to demonstrate to meet learning outcomes)

- evidence of different interpretations of grade boundaries across rubrics which the team considered resulted in the ineffective delivery of courses.

152. The assessment team's view was that a lack of academic leadership had contributed to the relatively low quality and accuracy of assessment guidance found in some modules. Senior faculty leadership said that module leads (postgraduate and undergraduate) were responsible for ensuring consistency in the quality of modules, which they said had been discussed at training away days. Postgraduate programme leads explained that they aimed to make sure assessment criteria was consistent across modules, but they did not check regularly how module leads were interpreting it for the benefit of their students. Undergraduate module leads said that overseeing consistent assessment information for students was outside their remit and a previous lack of a Deputy Subject Lead (e.g., Games) had impacted checking of consistency within this area. The Deputy Head of Subject for Games was appointed in 2022.

153. Faculty senior leadership confirmed that the relatively new Technology Subject Lead (appointed 2023) was responsible for overall oversight of quality and standards, but it was not clear to the assessment team how this monitoring process was being managed with programme and module leads. The assessment team, from discussions with faculty senior leadership, ascertained that not all courses were required to submit improvement plans; only the ones that fell below the university's own performance benchmarks (student retention, achievement, feedback and external examiner reports). Module leads, in discussions with the assessment team, highlighted that the move towards rubrics within assessment briefs had been recent. Rubrics were developed to help students see where they were meeting or not meeting targets. It was not clear what oversight the faculty had provided to ensure a consistent interpretation of university assessment guidelines, the quality of assessment briefs and rubrics, and the assessment grading system. The assessment team concluded that this could have a significant impact on effective delivery of assessment.

154. University senior staff explained that assessment and feedback were now a key priority for the university, having considered feedback from students in this area. Senior leadership said that they intended to change the current assessment grading system (A+ to G), and that Deputy Heads of Subject would be exploring consistency in assessment practices. The university were planning a review of assessment that would focus on three areas:

    a. preparing students for assessment

    b. themes about feedback

    c. fairness of assessment.

155. At the time of the investigation, plans to address the quality of assessment guidance had not been developed. Therefore, it was not possible to evaluate the potential impact of the changes that the university was intending to make, but the focus of the review aligned with the findings of the assessment team.

156. The assessment team agreed that the university's suggested focus on preparing students for assessment was important, especially given that many students in computing come into the university with low entry tariffs and from less traditional backgrounds. However, the team also thought that the university needed to place more emphasis on the quality and accuracy of assessment information provided to students. At the time of the assessment, the university had appointed a new university Academic Practice Lead. The team were of the view that this

would help assessment and feedback across the university, but it also thought that the university needed to give greater attention to training and development of staff at all levels.

157. The team also expected to find that the university was analysing data to make sure that assessment information was accurate and consistent. It could see no evidence of this.

158. In summary, in the assessment team's view, some courses were not being effectively delivered because the quality, consistency and clarity of information about assessment provided to students to enable them to learn effectively was insufficient to ensure that they were all in receipt of a high quality academic experience. The assessment team identified several concerns with the quality of assessment information students received which in the team's view impacted the effective delivery of courses. These concerns included a lack of assessment information, and information provided to guide students on the requirements of assessment within their courses that was not clear enough to enable them to know where to focus their learning. The team also identified a lack of consistency of assessment information across course and module learning outcomes, assessment briefs and assessment tasks. An expectation of effective course delivery would be that there should be an alignment of these core elements of assessment, without which it is very difficult for students to demonstrate the intended course learning outcomes.

159. The assessment team considered whether the different ways in which module teams had interpreted assessment criteria, and the extent to which modules were fully addressing the course learning outcomes might have wider implications about the validity, reliability, and credibility of assessments. It appeared in some modules that assessment grading boundaries were being interpreted differently and, in some courses, alignment between course and module learning outcomes was not always clear. The assessment team could not explore these issues because of the time available for the assessment but identified that there could be issues in these areas.

B1 conclusions

160. The assessment team's view was that, on balance, the university had not ensured that students taught on the computing courses (identified in paragraph 18) were consistently receiving a high quality academic experience. The assessment team's view was that the increased pace of content delivery and concentrated nature of assessment, as a consequence of the way in which changes to the university's course delivery mode were undertaken (concern 1), and lack of clarity of assessment processes (concern 2), had resulted in courses not being delivered effectively (B1.3d).

161. In relation to concern 1, the assessment team acknowledged that work was ongoing to restructure computing courses to better fit the university's new 'semesterisation' delivery model (paragraphs 73, 74), and that recent senior faculty appointments were intended to help to address the lack of oversight of the quality of the academic experience across computing courses. While there had been some changes to assessment timings to address the concentration of workload for students, it was evident to the assessment team that in new course designs the concentration of assessment events remained problematic. The team considered that this was a direct result of the 'semesterisation' process, which meant there was less flexibility in timetabling assessments. At the time of the assessment, plans to

address course design were in progress but the assessment team's view was that it was too early to gauge the success of such amendments to course design, and at the time of the assessment, the university acknowledged that there were continued issues with the 'semesterisation' model (paragraph 95) that needed resolving. The assessment team highlighted the importance of closer faculty oversight of changes to course design, and the need for more resources to support effective training and development of staff to ensure that course delivery was effective for all students.

162. In conclusion, based on the existing position at the time of the assessment, the team found the university was not consistently providing a high quality academic experience because:

- **Concern 1: The delivery model was not effective for the nature of the undergraduate cohort** (discussed in paragraphs 44-100). The assessment team's view was the way in which the new 'semesterised' delivery model was implemented by the university led to ineffective delivery of some computing courses (B1.3d). The assessment team found that some computing modules had not been sufficiently adapted to suit the new university delivery model as a consequence. The scheduling of assessments meant that courses were not being effectively delivered, given the concentrated nature of teaching including assessment timelines, and cumulative impacts of this on students needing to take resits and study for new modules.

- The assessment team's view was that the challenges set out in concern 1 would have an amplified impact on certain types of students given the nature of the university's computing cohort (e.g., low entry tariff, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (IMD 1 and 2)). The faculty leadership team told the assessment team that the university identified as a 'widening participation' institution, and this was borne out in the makeup of the undergraduate student cohort (paragraphs 20-23). Undergraduate computing students at the university were more likely to have lower levels of prior educational attainment than the sector average. The assessment team were of the view that the increased pace of delivery would have been especially challenging for students with lower levels of prior attainment, especially at the outset of their studies, where they are likely to be acclimatising to study in higher education.

- The assessment team concluded that insufficient attention had been taken by university and faculty leadership to ensure that learning was manageable for all students as a consequence of changes to course delivery, resulting in ineffective delivery. Discussions between the assessment team and computing staff had raised questions about whether the university had enabled sufficient lead-in time and staff training to support adaptation of course content and structure to align with the university's 'semesterised' approach, and the extent to which the impacts of such changes on the manageability of assessments for students had been fully considered.

- The assessment team was especially concerned about the impacts of the university's semesterised' approach on course delivery for the significant number of students who commenced their studies as full-time students and who subsequently had moved onto part-time pathways. Table 8 highlights that part-time students, while more likely to complete their courses than full-time students, attained significantly lower level awards at the university. The university explained that the lower outcomes for part-time students

were due to the fact that this category of students included those who had failed and were retaking/repeating modules. However, the assessment team thought there was a need for further investigation into how changes to course design and delivery, including changes made during the move to 'semesterisation', may have also impacted the experiences of these students.

163. In relation to concern 2, the assessment team acknowledged that the university was in the process of reviewing its assessment and feedback practices which should in the assessment team's view address some of the core issues highlighted in this report. University senior staff confirmed with the assessment team that assessment and feedback were key priorities for the university, and that there were plans to simplify the university assessment grading system (paragraph 117), and to address assessment and feedback issues more widely (paragraph 154). However, at the time of the investigation, plans to address assessment and feedback had not been developed so it was not possible for the assessment team to evaluate the potential impact of the changes that the university was intending to implement.

164. In conclusion, based on the existing position at the time of the assessment, the team found the university was not consistently providing a high quality academic experience because of:

- **Concern 2: The lack of clarity, level of detail, and consistency of information about assessment** (discussed in paragraphs 101-159). The assessment team's view was that the complex nature of information about assessment and lack of consistency between different sources of assessment information (university, course, module), created additional barriers for students in navigating assessment requirements at the university. While acknowledging that assessment rubrics were a relatively new initiative within the university, with the intention of supporting students' understanding of how marks were awarded, the assessment team found them to be of poor quality in enabling students' understanding of course requirements.

- While the assessment team saw evidence of well thought-out assessments, and use of appropriate learning outcomes and assessment guidance in some modules and courses, the relative scale of the issues found was significant. The assessment team found that assessment rubrics were poorly developed in 62 per cent of modules reviewed (from a 43 per cent sample of core computing modules). The assessment team also found assessment briefs were weak in 37 per cent of modules reviewed (from a 35 per cent sample of core computing modules). The relatively poor quality of assessment guidance, affecting students across the ability range, and with greater potential impact on those in need of most help, guided the assessment team's view that the university had not ensured that course delivery is effective (B1.3b).

- The assessment team identified multiple points of confusion for students regarding assessment information. The team was especially concerned that the manner in which information on assessment was being provided to students would have a particular impact on the academic experience of students coming into the university with low entry tariffs. In the assessment team's view, the combined impact of complex central assessment information with consequences for how this was interpreted at course and module level created a number of barriers for computing students in trying to navigate the requirements of assessment.

- The assessment team found a lack of consistency in how assessment information was being interpreted at the module level, which meant that in some courses students' experiences of assessment were poor and resulted in ineffective delivery (B1.3d). The general quality of assessment documentation was found to be of a relatively poor standard in many of the modules sampled by the assessment team due to the issues described (contradictory information, errors in documentation, lack of clarity of information, insufficient assessment information); all of which the assessment team concluded would have impacted the quality of students' learning experiences, especially for those students who were most likely to need more explicit guidance (for example, those with relatively low entry tariffs, lower socioeconomic background: paragraphs 20-23). The assessment team's view was that the lack of alignment between course and module learning outcomes and complexities in the different ways in which information was presented would make it difficult for students to know what assessment requirements were and how to meet them, and that this lack of clarity could affect students' relative levels of success.

- The assessment team's view was that the lack of senior oversight of assessment practices had resulted in the low quality of information about assessment found in some modules. Its view was that there was a need for greater clarity about lines of responsibility, more focused training for staff on assessment, as well as university-wide initiatives to ensure the overall quality of assessment guidance within the university.

Condition B2: Resources, support and student engagement

165. The assessment team reviewed a range of information relevant to condition B2 (see Annex A for the full text), which is detailed through the discussion below.

166. In the assessment team's view, there were concerns that may relate to compliance with some of the requirements set out in condition B2.2, as follows:

> B2.2 Without prejudice to the principles and requirements provided for by any other condition of registration and the scope of B2.1, the Provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure:
>
> a. each cohort of students registered on each higher education course receives resources and support which are sufficient for the purpose of ensuring:
>
> i. a high quality academic experience for those students; and
>
> ii. those students succeed in and beyond higher education

167. The assessment team also particularly noted the definition articulated in B2.3:

> B2.3 For the purposes of this condition [B2.2], "all reasonable steps" is to be interpreted in a manner which (without prejudice to the other relevant conditions):
>
> a. focuses and places significant weight on:
>
> i. the particular academic needs of each cohort of students based on prior academic attainment and capability; and

> ii. the principle that the greater the academic needs of the cohort of students, the number and nature of the steps needed to be taken are likely to be more significant;
>
> b. places less weight, as compared to the factor described in B2.3a., on the Provider's financial constraints

168. The assessment team considered the arrangements for student engagement relevant to condition B2.2b, including student involvement in relevant committees, and opportunities for students to contribute to course design through their feedback. Based on the information reviewed within the described scope of this quality assessment, the assessment team did not identify areas of concern with reference to condition B2.2.b.

Concern 3 (condition B2.2a): Limited access to resources that would support games students' independent learning

169. NSS scores[15] for 'Learning resources' for first degree computing students at the university have been in the bottom quartile of responses within the UK higher education sector, with little change in NSS scores over the three years from 2020-2022 (57 per cent, 59 per cent and 56 per cent). Scores for 'The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well' were low, at 44 per cent, 60 per cent and 51 per cent for NSS 2020, NSS 2021, and NSS 2022 respectively, and were all below the sector average. This led the assessment team to explore the provision of access to specialist learning resources for computing students at the university.

170. In 2018 the University of Northampton moved to the Waterside campus, closing its Park (Kingsthorpe) and Avenue (Maidwell) campuses. The university's aim in making this move was to secure a more central and accessible site within Northampton, that would be more attractive to prospective students both in the UK and overseas. Computing provision at Waterside campus is currently located in the Learning Hub building for computing students, and the Creative Hub building for games students.

171. The assessment team reviewed data from a range of datasets, including the NSS, student module evaluations, and student-staff liaison minutes and found evidence that a lack of space and access to specialist equipment had had a negative impact on some students' learning. The assessment team's view was that the physical learning resources were not being deployed effectively to meet the needs of the cohort of students (condition B2.4).

172. Information provided by the university indicated that there were three rooms used by games students located in the Creative Hub, five rooms used by computing students located in the Learning Hub, and one room used by computing students located in the Senate building. The rooms in the Creative Hub housed higher specification computers required for games courses.

173. Games courses require higher specification computers than general or business computing courses, as games development software is typically more demanding than programming

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[15] Source: Internal OfS analysis of NSS results, published data is available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/national-student-survey-data/nss-data-archive/.

software. In particular, the software used for Games Art requires computers with far greater graphical capabilities than needed by most other computer software. The assessment team was given a guided tour of the teaching rooms used by computing students and found these to be sufficiently equipped with modern computers and other equipment required by students on computing and games courses.

174. The faculty business plan 2020-23 acknowledged that 'specialist space remains stretched in some areas'. Comments from computing staff at the faculty away day held in July 2022 included one stating that the university should 'stop using laboratories for general teaching', arguing that doing so was 'not comfortable for students, and runs the risk of specialist equipment being tampered with'. Two further comments from staff at the same event argued that the university should work on student access to software and hardware resources. A word cloud poll conducted at the January 2023 faculty staff away day highlighted 'space' as one of the main areas that faculty staff felt was a challenge.

175. Computing staff that the assessment team spoke to explained that there had been a reduction in dedicated space for computing since the move to the Waterside campus, in terms of the number of rooms available for student use. Computing technologists told the assessment team they were now in a position where they had to 'fight for space'. Staff explained that the way physical spaces were used on campus had reduced opportunities for students to use learning resources. Staff felt that due to timetabling pressures in relation to scheduled teaching activities, ad hoc opportunities for computing students to use rooms equipped with computers were more limited. Access for students studying games courses to rooms containing high performance computers were not always prioritised for use by these students. Staff thought that a dedicated off-timetable computing room, containing a wide range of equipment, was required to encourage students to engage with the physical spaces outside of formal teaching.

176. The assessment team reviewed room timetables for the 2022-23 academic year for the eight rooms used by computing and games students and noted that there was sufficient space available to cover the taught sessions, as well as a range of times during which rooms were not in use, allowing computing students to use them for independent study. However, the assessment team saw that there was very little availability for independent study in any of the three rooms in the Creative Hub, which houses computers of the required specification and is equipped with the correct software to support games students on their courses. In the first semester, the assessment team saw that there was very little availability of these rooms between the hours of 09:00 and 17:30, typically limited to one hour per day at lunchtime. However, dedicated games lab time was available for students to work independently in the second semester, equating to 24 hours a week across the three rooms. The assessment team heard from students that the Creative Hub opens from 07:15 to 22:00, with possible extensions to midnight on request. The assessment team's view from the timetables was that access to these key resources for games students was very limited in the first semester.

177. The assessment team noted that the university's new 'semesterised' teaching delivery model (detailed in concern 1), introduced in 2021, meant that for modules delivered in semester 1, there were no open study workshops available for games students, and minimal availability for students to engage in independent study to meet module assessment requirements while

on campus. The team's view was that this could have a negative effect on the abilities of games students to succeed on their courses.

178. The assessment team reviewed room timetables for the 2022-23 academic year for rooms in the Learning Hub, which housed computers of a lower specification for use by general and Business Computing students. The timetables indicated far greater availability of these rooms for informal student use, and the assessment team also heard that the Learning Hub is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. As a result, the assessment team chose to focus on access to learning resources for Games students.

179. Computing staff who met the assessment team explained the university's approach to timetabling was partly responsible for limiting student access to high performance computers. The assessment team heard that the timetabling service allocated rooms, and did not differentiate between rooms containing specialist, or high performance computers required by computing students to undertake their courses, and general teaching rooms equipped with less powerful computers. This approach had led to rooms containing high performance computers being used for general teaching on modules that did not require high specification computers or the specialist software that they support. Module leads told the assessment team that 'Timetabling needs to work with IT to prioritise what students need access to and, given that other subjects use computer labs, this eats into our timetables'. The assessment team thought the views expressed by staff were reasonable and may explain why there was greater pressure on the Creative Hub rooms in comparison to those in the Learning Hub.

180. The assessment team found that timetabling pressures at the university limited the availability of computers for independent learning use by games students. This lack of availability was especially acute during the day, when the rooms were in use for teaching purposes. There was greater availability of computers in the evenings; however, in the assessment team's view, evening availability would not be appropriate for students who have less flexibility in the time they can attend campus, for example those with caring responsibilities, those in employment, or those who make longer journeys to the campus. The assessment team's view was that it should have been possible for games students to complete their courses using only university facilities, but the team found that students were struggling to access the computers they required for independent learning because they were in near constant use for teaching purposes during the daytime. As set out in paragraphs 181-192 below, the assessment team reviewed other options for the games students to access the necessary resources, and steps that the university had taken to provide these, but did not find these to be effective in ensuring that games students were receiving sufficient resources.

181. The assessment team heard from programme leaders that students were allowed to enter rooms during teaching sessions that they were not timetabled to attend to use available computers for independent study. However, computing staff confirmed that they did not have dedicated space for computing on campus, and that there were no subject specific spaces on the Waterside campus. Staff felt that this had negatively affected the sense of belonging for computing staff and students, leading to a 'loss of community'. Staff felt that some computing students were intimidated by the idea of entering a common space used by students studying various disciplines, and that students were uncomfortable interrupting teaching sessions. The assessment team concurred that not all students may feel comfortable entering a teaching

session to find a computer to use for independent study, and also concluded that this would not always be a practical solution for games students. For example, for students undertaking group work (such as the projects undertaken by BA Games Art and BA Games Design students across all three years of their courses), where discussion was necessary, it would not be feasible for students to do this alongside a teaching session that was in progress, as it would be disruptive to other students in the class. The assessment team also formed the view that the capacities of the rooms in the Creative Hub (two rooms with a capacity for 20 students, and one with a capacity for 17) meant that only a small number of computers would be available for students to use during the teaching sessions.

182. The assessment team formed the view that a lack of availability of the higher specification computers, equipped with the relevant software for students on games courses, and for independent study, meant that these students were not receiving the resources required to ensure a high quality academic experience.

183. The assessment team found that the combined lack of physical space in which to work, and limited access to appropriate software, made it particularly difficult for some final year undergraduate games students to complete their work. A third year games student commented in the NSS on the lack of space, making it difficult to complete work for deadlines. In student-staff liaison committee minutes, Level 6 games students argued that essential software necessary for them to be able to complete their final year projects was not installed (e.g., lack of software installed on computers in room CH120); this meant some students had no reason to attend sessions. Students were left in a position where they could not complete parts of their work at the university and as a result had to change the focus of their work. This lack of access resulted in students not attending sessions, as the required software for their course was not available at the university for the students to use. Similarly, at Level 4, students in student-staff liaison minutes highlighted the difficulties they faced in setting up Visual Studio and linking to SFML (a cross-platform software development library designed to provide a simple application programming interface (API) to various multimedia components in computers). One external examiner reported that students on practical-based modules had bought copies of software such as MATLAB themselves, given the difficulties they had experienced in getting the support they needed at the university.

184. The assessment team explored what steps the university had taken to ensure access to resources required by games students. Senior faculty staff told the assessment team that new home students enrolling at the university were entitled to a university supplied laptop, or £500 off their accommodation and catering costs. In discussions with games students and staff, the assessment team heard that the laptop did not come equipped with the software that games students required for their courses, and that it was not powerful enough to properly run some of the software required by games students. In interviews with the assessment team, second year (Level 5) students said that the software they needed would not work on the laptops provided by the university as it was resource heavy. Students expressed frustration with the fact that the equipment they were provided with did not adequately support the course they were enrolled on.

185. A review of the university's 'laptop offer terms and conditions' confirmed that the laptop was supplied 'as new' and did not come with any additional software installed. The BA Games Art

and BA Games Design handbooks stated that 'The free laptop on offer from the university is not a high enough specification to run games software'. The assessment team's view was that, while generally the supply of a laptop is a positive initiative, the university supplied laptop was not an appropriate resource that would help games students to succeed on their courses. It did not include the software required by games students and was not powerful enough to run the software should students acquire it at their own expense. The assessment team also noted that the university did not supply laptops to international games students.

186. The BA Games Art and BA Games Design handbooks, provided by the university to games students, stated: 'Whilst it is possible to complete assignments using only the university facilities, in reality much of your practical study and portfolio development will need to be done outside of timetabled sessions in order to achieve a professional standard and a good degree. We recommend all students have access to an up-to date PC at home that meets the minimum specification of the software we use…'. The assessment team's view was that, while it was reasonable to expect that games students might benefit from the flexibility of having their own PC at home, recommending that all games students had one in order to achieve a 'good degree' demonstrated that the university could have taken further steps to ensure that the games students receive the resources required to succeed in higher education.

187. The assessment team noted that OfS data showed that in 2021-22, 38 per cent of full-time undergraduate computing students at the university were from postcodes covered by the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintiles 1 or 2, (paragraph 21), and that this might have limited the abilities of games students to be able to purchase their own equipment of a sufficient specification to run the software required for games courses. The assessment team considered that games students might opt to accept the university offer of £500 off catering or accommodation costs instead of the university supplied laptop, as the laptop was not an appropriate resource for their courses. The assessment team's view was that while the £500 discount was a positive option offered by the university, it would only benefit those students who intended to stay in university accommodation or purchase catering from campus, and that the saving of £500 would not in itself allow students to equip themselves with the required computer hardware and resources at home.

188. The assessment team found multiple references to students' appreciation of lecturer support for their learning, with students in NSS comments seeing the lack of access to resources as a failure of central IT, and something out of the control of lecturers. Student-staff liaison committee minutes stated that 'Students recognised the huge efforts lecturers have made to resolve this issue, acquiring licences, new hardware and constant petitioning of IT services since the summer'.

189. A module lead also explained the impact of delays in relation to the availability of specialist software, which had meant they had to rewrite module content two years in a row as the IT resources needed were not available. In the assessment team's view, delays in software availability had created additional load for lecturers, impacted course design and students' access to the preferred resources that lecturers would have liked to use but had not been able to.

190. Faculty senior leadership acknowledged that they were considering increasing the specification of the university supplied laptop for future cohorts. The assessment team's view was that a significant increase in specification, and provision of appropriate software, would be required to turn this into a useful resource for games students. The assessment team was unable to take a view on the effectiveness of this proposal as it had not been actioned by the university at the time of the assessment.

191. The assessment team heard from university staff during a tour of the university's facilities that further high specification computers were being purchased and set up on campus. At the time of the assessment, the university was awaiting delivery of the new computers. The assessment team 's view was that this was likely to be a positive step, and that if access to these computers by games students was appropriately facilitated through timetabling, that this step may be able to resolve the issues set out above.

192. Staff with responsibilities including maintenance of hardware and software (technical staff) explained to the assessment team that they were working with the central timetabling team to ensure it better understood the difference between specialist, high performance, and standard computing rooms. The assessment team thought that if successful, this was a further positive step that had the potential to reduce or resolve the issues set out above.

193. In the assessment team's view, the university should have ensured games students received access to adequate physical and digital resources, including computers of sufficient specification equipped with the necessary software to enable them to benefit from a high quality academic experience, and to enable them to succeed in and beyond higher education. The assessment team's view was that the availability of these resources to support games students in managing the requirements of their courses, and especially to consolidate their learning and complete assessments, was essential.

194. The assessment team were told by staff and students that a lack of access to key resources for games students had cumulative negative impacts, including on their attendance on campus, their ability to meet assessment deadlines, to do their best work, and on their sense of belonging (paragraphs 181,183). The assessment team thought this would particularly affect students from lower socioeconomic groups, for example IMD1 and IMD2 backgrounds because of the financial implications of additional costs of resources, and the increased probability of a lack of access to space and equipment to work effectively at home. Lack of access to specialist space, rooms and resources on campus during the day may also significantly impact students who do not live locally to the university, given the time and cost involved for them in making trips to campus. The assessment team also noted several references to the specific impact on Level 6 students trying to complete major projects. Therefore, the assessment team concluded that the university could have taken more steps to ensure that games students at the university were receiving resources sufficient to ensure a high quality academic experience, or to allow them to succeed in and beyond higher education.

Concern 4 (condition B2.2a): Insufficient access to specialist learning resources

195. Having considered the access of games students to specialist space and software relating to Games courses, the assessment team also considered the specialist learning resources needed more widely by all computing students at the university. NSS scores[16] between 2020 and 2022 for 'The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well' have all been below the sector average, as highlighted in concern 3. In investigating this area further, the assessment team identified issues concerning computing students' access to software that extended beyond Games courses (concern 3) that suggested to the assessment team that resources were not sufficient to ensure that all computing students had a high quality academic experience.

196. The assessment team sought further information about access to software for computing students. The team explored this by speaking to staff and students and reviewing data supplied by the university relating to student experience of both central and faculty focused IT support. The assessment team saw that the faculty business plan for 2020-23 acknowledged that 'deployment of specialist software has remained challenging' and had highlighted 'Improved management deployment of specialist software' as a faculty priority for 2022. A word cloud poll undertaken at the January 2023 faculty staff away day confirmed that 'IT limited resources' is one of the largest challenges facing staff, and they also mentioned difficulties with 'admin access'. However, the same poll highlighted 'IT access' as something that staff felt was going well, although staff and students in meetings with the assessment team were predominantly negative about the difficulties of accessing appropriate software.

197. The assessment team identified information within student-staff liaison committee minutes, student module evaluations, the NSS, and from meetings with students that suggested that students across all Levels (4 to 7) were struggling with access to software, and that this had impacted students' ability to manage their work effectively.

198. Student-staff liaison committee minutes across games, general computing, and esports courses set out student concerns about lack of access to specialist equipment and software. The student-staff minutes summarised the views of specific groups of students as a collective. Computing students from all years reported that computing labs were not ready for the arrival of students and that students felt they could not effectively study their chosen subjects as they did not have appropriate access to the required software. Second year (Level 5) computing students found the software required would not work on the laptops provided by the university as it was resource heavy. Students expressed frustration with the fact that the equipment they were provided with did not adequately support the course they were enrolled on (this aligns with issues raised in concern 3).

199. Difficulties in accessing software were highlighted in student module evaluations, student-staff liaison committee minutes, NSS comments, and interviews the assessment team had with students. Level 5 student module evaluations showed that access to module specific resources had relatively low levels of student satisfaction, with ratings of most satisfied (Likert

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[16] Source: Internal OfS analysis of NSS results, published data is available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/national-student-survey-data/nss-data-archive/.

scale ratings 1 and 2) being between 33 and 55 per cent, but wider analysis was necessary to ascertain whether this was a substantive issue for Level 5 students given the small size of the sample reviewed. In a quarter of the Level 6 student module evaluations reviewed by the assessment team, students mentioned frustration with software issues, and there was also evidence that Level 4 and 5 students were affected by a lack of access to software necessary to be able to complete their assignments.

200. Students across year groups and in various forums (NSS, module evaluations, interviews, staff-student committees) reported on not having access to essential software which impacted their ability to complete assignments. Approximately 10 per cent of computing students' main concerns in the NSS, voiced in negative open text comments, were related to technical issues with computer hardware or software. These complaints related to computers in the Learning Hub being inoperable for long periods of time, problems with installing and updating software, software being incorrectly installed or not the right versions required by students to complete their work, and not being able to complete work on university computers. The assessment team were of the view that this would particularly impact students who were unable to purchase the required software and who did not have the financial or physical resource to download software at home, given potential internet constraints due to associated costs, available places to work, and location in terms of internet access.

201. Students commented in NSS feedback, student module evaluations, student-staff liaison meetings, and in meetings with the assessment team that the results of not having access to essential software meant that they could not practise key skills or test the work they had developed. Students said difficulties with software access led to reduced progress on their work, especially in the case of final projects. A student in NSS feedback argued that without the essential software it was not possible to excel in final major projects. Another student in NSS comments stated that lack of server access meant it was not possible to complete the assessment requirements of their module. The difficulties of trying to complete work on university machines was highlighted in student module evaluation feedback, where a student explained that they felt that the computers did not have sufficient memory (RAM); this made it difficult to go back and change work on university computers (undo/redo), and meant potentially losing work due to software crashing. The assessment team's view was that these issues created additional difficulties for computing students in trying to keep on top of their work.

202. Students made repeated references to issues concerning the inconsistency of software availability and having to waste considerable time to find university computers with the correct programme installed, such as Zbrush (a digital sculpting tool that combines 3D/2.5D modelling, texturing, and painting). Students across modules highlighted the lack of software availability. Examples from four modules are provided below:

- 'The room we have the module in has very spotty software availability. Most notably Zbrush, I have had to check a number of different PCs to find one that had the software. Additionally, I am not able to work on complicated substance painter scenes on the PCs available, as the software will crash without warning.'

- 'The equipment isn't always up to par. When a Zbrush project gets big enough, usually toward the end of the sculpting phase, the PC does not have enough RAM to keep track

of undo/redo, so you have to be incredibly careful with your strokes and you are sometimes unable to go back. Additionally, the quicksave folders are often completely full which can result in corrupted models if the software attempts to save. This is because the PC's C drives are completely full. Additionally, other software such as substance painter will crash when a project reaches a certain level of complexity, making it very unstable to continue working on.'

- 'The lecturers are able to do their best in supporting students, but the resources that we need are often inaccessible. We can't access the classrooms without a lecturer, often times softwares that we need on these computers are promised but not fulfilled or simply denied.'

- 'Would appreciate if the Oracle Database can work outside of School Wi-Fi. I had to find an alternative by creating a Cloud Database to practise while studying at home.'

203. In summary, lack of access to essential software meant that some students were not attending teaching sessions as they did not have the resources to undertake the work they needed to do on-site. The university provides licences for 90 per cent of games software so it was feasible that students could study at home. But they did need the high specification equipment, internet access and bandwidth to cope with the nature of some of the software they were using. A key issue identified by computing staff was the loss of student community on-site following the move to Waterside, as a result of students not having places to study and not having the equipment needed on-site. The assessment team's view was that lack of access to on-site resources would have had a differential impact, in that some students would not have been able to afford the equipment that they needed. Furthermore, for those students who chose not to come onto campus, the lack of interaction with other students could have had a greater impact on those who were struggling with their studies. The assessment team noted that not having equipment at the start of courses could impact students' progress in what had already been identified as an intense model of delivery following the changes made to course delivery as a consequence of the impact of the new 'semesterisation' process.

204. The assessment team found issues with student access to appropriate software were still present at the time of the assessment. Students in student-staff liaison committee minutes identified that the issues Level 5 students had experienced had been raised previously by the students now studying at Level 6, but there had been a lack of action to rectify the problem. Computing staff said that the issues had been raised with the faculty management team, and that several resolution strategies were being examined, such as higher specification machines. Faculty away day information, the faculty business plan, and student feedback all confirmed that access to software was an ongoing issue.

205. As a result of the student feedback and the university's comments in the faculty business plan, the assessment team was concerned that specialist learning resources used by computing students might not be receiving the required level of maintenance and support to ensure that they were suitable for the needs of computing students. The assessment team sought to explore this potential concern through a review of further relevant information, and in discussions with staff and students.

206. The assessment team reviewed university supplied data on the number of, and resolution times for, incidents raised with the central IT team by students. The mean average time to

resolve computing students' IT incidents was 11.5 days compared with 8.62 for all other students in 2020-21; this figure reduced to 5.72 days for computing students and 4.51 days for other students in 2021-22. However, the percentage of IT incidents raised by computing students as a percentage of the total number of incidents raised by students across the university has increased over the last three years from 33 per cent to 50 per cent of all incidents from 2019-20 to 2021-22. The assessment team's view was that computing students were more likely to raise more IT incidents than students studying other subjects, due to their requirements for access to specialist computer hardware and software not used by the wider student population. However, the assessment team's view was that computing students alone accounting for 50 per cent of incidents in 2021-22 was disproportionately high and indicated issues with how these students were initially supported to access resources. In reaching this view, the assessment team noted that in 2021-22 computing students accounted for 5.6 per cent of the university's full-time undergraduate student population, and 4.7 per cent of the university's full-time postgraduate population.[17] The assessment team sought to understand the high referral rate among computing students.

207. The university was hit by a cyberattack in March 2021, which took many university systems offline, or restricted staff and student access to them. The assessment team heard from faculty senior leadership that it took approximately three weeks to restore most of the university's core systems to working order, and that the feeling of staff was that the university had recovered well from the attack. At the time of the attack, assessment deadlines were paused so that students due to submit assignments would not be disadvantaged. However, the assessment team also heard that in its recovery the university had to prioritise systems that affected all students, and therefore that some very specialist systems (for example the university's Linux server) that computing students needed access to, took several months to restore to working order. The view of university staff was that this had a negative effect on NSS scores in 2020 and 2021. The view of the assessment team was that delays in getting specialist systems working had a significant impact on computing students who would need access to specialist resource to meet the requirements of their assessments.

208. Students who the assessment team spoke to said that some of the software they required for their courses was not available on university computers and stated that they felt this was because of security restrictions imposed following the cyberattack. Students also voiced concerns with computers crashing or running out of storage space, in their view predominantly due to the high system requirements of the software used by esports and games students. Lack of available storage space also affected general computing students.

209. Students were complimentary about the efforts of university teaching and technical staff (staff whose responsibilities included support and maintenance of university computer hardware and software) when they had sought assistance with IT issues, but felt that staff were not given the freedom to help and resolve issues themselves. Students thought that there was only one member of technical staff allocated to help with software issues, and that this had exacerbated problems with access to software required for their studies. Information provided by the university showed that there were at least two technicians who assisted students with

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[17] Source: OfS size and shape of provision data dashboard, students taught and registered by the university in 2021-22, as published on 12 April 2023.

software issues, either by installing and updating software, or by providing direct troubleshooting support.

210. Technical staff the assessment team spoke to stated that their ability to keep the software environment up-to-date was limited by security restrictions on what systems they could access and what permissions they had to update software. They said that these restrictions introduced following the cyberattack had caused a lack of agility when responding to student requests. Specifically, staff felt that the underlying issue was a lack of access to the C drives of university computers. The technical staff explained that while they had permission to update software to new versions, installation of new software packages required by students needed to be approved by central IT services. The assessment team also heard that, following the cyberattack, the university had hired an external company to test and assess software that technical staff wished to install, but this process had been slow, so the university had switched to an approach of undertaking checks on software internally.

211. The technical staff also identified space constraints as another limiting factor in keeping software updated. Specialist equipment needed to be packed away regularly, meaning that when technical staff took out and set up the equipment, software updates were frequently required, resulting in students having less time to use equipment. The assessment team thought this limited students' opportunities to practise and hone skillsets; this would be especially problematic for undergraduate students in their final year (Level 6) doing their final project work, and also for postgraduate students undertaking more in-depth study.

212. Teaching staff, in conversation with the assessment team, said that in their view one of the main reasons computing students got stuck during their studies was because university computers did not have the correct plugins installed, or the software itself was out-of-date. The teaching staff confirmed that they did not have the required IT access to resolve these issues themselves. The assessment team heard that teaching staff felt that there was 'a trust issue' in relation to cybersecurity at the university; technical staff were not enabled to resolve issues directly, as a result of the removal of their IT access in response to the cyberattack in 2021. Staff felt that this situation had led to increased bureaucracy, and also felt that IT requests for new software were now going to senior managers who would not necessarily take action for fear of being held accountable if things went wrong. Module leads told the assessment team that they had significant issues with accessing specialist software themselves, which affected their ability to manage course design and workload. One member of staff described having to rewrite module content in the first part of term as they did not have access to the software needed and confirmed that this problem had happened two years in a row.

213. The assessment team's view was that there was a conflict between the security requirements imposed by the university's central IT policy and practices, and the faculty's requirements in addressing the bespoke needs of the university's computing students. The assessment team's view was that the robust security measures introduced by the university during and following the 2021 cyberattack had a negative effect on the academic experience of computing students. This negative impact was because restrictions to IT access levels presented challenges for teaching and technical computing staff in resolving software issues for students, including installing specialist software required by students studying computing

courses, ensuring that software is up-to-date, and installing additional software plugins. These challenges with access to software were ongoing at the time of the assessment, as evidenced by the assessment team's conversations with both students and university staff. The reasonable opinion of the assessment team is that there are steps that the university had not taken to ensure that computing students received sufficient resources for the purposes of ensuring that they received a high quality academic experience. In reaching this view the assessment team considered the bespoke needs of computer students, and concluded that the delays in resolving student software issues had a significant negative effect on computing students' learning experiences at the university, and that students did not have a high quality academic experience as a result.

214. The assessment team heard from technical staff that progress was being made, and that at the time of the investigation these staff now have the ability to bypass approval from IT services if necessary (for example if a student's preparation for an exam period would be impacted by a lack of software), and that they were now granted higher levels of administrative access than in the immediate aftermath of the cyberattack. Technical staff confirmed that they were nearly at the point where they could re-image computers (for example to restore a computer's software completely when required due to a fault preventing it from functioning) and could install some additional software required by students themselves. Technical staff also explained that staff and student queues in the IT helpdesk had been separated to address delays to managing ongoing student and academic software and IT issues. The assessment team's view was that these were positive steps, but some areas were still a work in progress, and it was too early to assess whether they would be sufficient to address all of the concerns outlined above.

215. Teaching staff explained that, prior to the move to Waterside campus, some technicians were specifically allocated to supporting the computing subject area. However, following the move, most of this technical support had been centralised and was now shared across subject areas. The perception of teaching staff was that the move away from assigning dedicated technicians had made it more difficult to access support with setting up and maintaining specialist resources, with new approval processes making it more difficult to resolve problems in a timely manner for students. Previously, staff stated, these issues would have been more likely to have been solved 'in-house' by colleagues, who had a clearer understanding of the situational demands due to their close working relationships with computing staff and students.

216. The assessment team's view was that the switch to using a more centralised model of technical support following the move to Waterside campus had not been managed well enough to ensure appropriate support for, and maintenance of, the specialist resources required by computing students. Previously, dedicated technicians supporting the computing courses were able to better understand issues with unavailability or failure of specialist resources due to their closeness to the computing courses. The technicians were able to resolve these issues more effectively, as less interaction with and approval by the central IT department was required. In the view of the assessment team, the university did not appear to have been fully considered how the benefits of the previous model of technical support could be transferred to the new, centralised model.

217. University senior leaders who met the assessment team acknowledged that IT support for computing was 'not where it should be', and that specialist computing students were not being supported well in this regard. The faculty business plan at the time of assessment included a recommendation for increased collaboration with the university's professional services, stating that the aim for working with the central IT department was 'Provision to ensure that the IT infrastructure and services enable core business to be delivered uninterrupted. Streamlining of online platforms to promote retention and engagement of students is paramount'. Such plans to enhance IT provision may help in addressing the issues identified above, but as these plans were not available at the time of the assessment, the team was unable to comment on the credibility of them.

218. In conclusion, it was the assessment team's view that not all students had been provided with access to the resources that were essential for them to be able to study effectively and to meet the requirements of their courses. The assessment team's view was that many of the issues identified above were preventable, and that the university could have taken additional steps to ensure that computing students at the university were receiving resources sufficient to ensure a high quality academic experience (B2.2a.i), and to allow them to succeed in and beyond higher education (B2.2a.ii).

Concern 5 (condition B2.2a, B2.3a): Limited academic learning support for computing students

219. In meetings with the centralised academic support staff, the assessment team identified concerns around whether there was sufficient centralised professional services learning support to ensure a high quality academic experience for computing students (B2.2a.i), and whether the university had taken appropriate steps in relation to supporting the particular academic needs of the cohort based on prior academic attainment (B2.3a.i).

220. Centralised academic support was provided as part of the university's integrated learner support model. The integrated learner support model comprised the following elements:

- Centralised professional support from a Student Support and Advice Team, responsible for triage, casework, monitoring and liaison.

- Centralised professional support from specialist support teams, with responsibilities including ASSIST (Additional Student Support and Inclusion Services Team), financial guidance, counselling, and advice on residential life.

- Programme focused professional and academic support from professional services teams (Library and Learning Support), covering academic librarians, learning development, learning technology, and academic, employability and digital skills including Changemaker teams).

- Programme focused academic support through the programme from the Personal Academic Tutor (PAT), module team, and programme leader.

221. The assessment team found, from a review of approximately a third of module evaluations (21 from 68) in the computing subject field for 2021-22, that levels of student agreement were relatively low for the statement 'the library resources (physical and online) and associated support services such as Learning Development and Academic Librarians have supported my

learning well'. In 12 Level 6 student module evaluations, the mean percentage of students rating this statement 1 or 2 (strongest agreement with the statement on a five-point scale) varied from 0 to 75 per cent, with figures of 45 per cent or less found in six of 12 of these modules. In nine student module evaluations at Levels 4 and 5, the respective figures for the level of student agreement with the statement about library and academic support resources (as outlined above) varied from 10 to 75 per cent, with figures of 45 per cent or less in four out of nine of these modules. The assessment team noted that the amalgamation of several different areas of provision in the question might have presented confusion for students and made interpretation of where exactly the student concern lay difficult for the assessment team to extract from the ratings alone. But the data suggested a concern with support in these areas, which included learning development, in some modules. Centralised professional support teams thought that another factor impacting students' assessment of the quality of support services in supporting their learning was that some students would not know what learning development was.

222. To understand the academic support available to students, the assessment team reviewed computing students' use of three centrally provided types of assignment coaching, involving (i) drop-ins; (ii) tutorials and (iii) workshops. The university provides drop-ins for students during a one hour window online or on campus five days a week to address short questions students might have. Tutorials allow students more time for study skills support with a tutor (30 minute slots with students able to book a maximum of one slot a week, also available online or on campus). Group tutorials are also available to students. Learning support at the university also provides a number of themed workshops on study skills available to all students, and subject focused workshops that are delivered within computing courses (paragraphs 234-237).

223. The assessment team found evidence of very low take-up of some academic support services by computing students. In 2021-22, no computing students had taken up the offer of centrally provided tutorials (data was not available for 2019-20 and 2020-21). This was against a total number of 3,264[18] take-ups of tutorials from students in other subjects within the faculty. In 2021-22, one computing student took up the offer of drop-in support compared with a figure of 289 student interactions university-wide with drop-in support. Four computing students took up this type of support from September 2022 to May 2023, compared with 684 interactions university-wide with drop-in support. When considering these figures, the assessment team noted that computing students accounted for approximately 5.6[19] per cent of the university's full-time undergraduate student population.

224. To put the drop-in figures into perspective, the rate of take-up of drop-in support across the university in 2021-22 was low at a maximum of 5.1 per cent (in relation to total student numbers, paragraph 226), whereas in computing the comparable figure was 0.61 per cent. These figures represent student interactions and not student numbers so the figure of 0.61 per cent is the most generous interpretation possible when calculating the overall percentage computing of students accessing drop-in support. In the assessment team's view, it was

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[18] The figure of 3,264 indicates the number of attendees which could include repeat visits by students.

[19] Source: <u>OfS size and shape of provision data dashboard</u>, students taught and registered by the university in 2021-22, as published on 12 April 2023.

highly probable that fewer students were using the drop-in service but using it multiple times. Furthermore, only 8.6 per cent of the total number of interactions with workshops by students from the faculty comprised computing, games, and esports students. However, approximately 17 per cent of computing students had received study skills development in workshops integral to course delivery (Table 10). The assessment team concluded that computing students were making very little use of central academic support which was surprising given the outcomes data presented in concern 1 suggesting that students could have benefited from additional support.

225. The assessment team's view was that the level of interaction of computing students with centralised academic support appeared low, especially in the context of high withdrawal rates for students, where one of the main reasons was academic failure (as outlined in concern 1). At undergraduate level, for example, withdrawal rates for all courses' cohorts from 2017-18 to 2020-21 ranged from 29 per cent to 43 per cent. In 2021-22 alone, at undergraduate level, 43 per cent of students who withdrew[20] did so because of academic failure/left in bad standing/not permitted to progress. The assessment team's view was that given the issues that many students had faced with their studies, from feedback from computing staff, students and review of datasets, it was surprising that so few students in 2021-22 had taken up academic support assistance (i.e., drop-ins, tutorials or workshops).

226. In reviewing students' ratings of support received and their relatively low take-up of central academic support, the assessment team looked at whether there was sufficient staffing within central academic support teams to meet student needs. The university confirmed that staffing in relation to total student numbers of 13,430 (including 650 computing students)[21] was 19.76 FTE in the Additional Student Support and Inclusion Services Team (ASSIST). However, the central professional support teams, in meetings with the assessment team, expressed that they felt that staffing was insufficient to support student needs.

227. The central professional support team explained that it had been impacted by long-term absences, and that the team lacked experience due to the loss of two experienced colleagues. The centralised professional support team staff estimated that approximately 2,000 students were engaging with disability services although they could not confirm the numbers or the wait time students experienced in being seen, as a result of issues with access to data (as discussed in concern 6). During the 2022-23 academic year, academic inclusion plans totalled 369, including 31 computing students. Staff from the centralised academic support team said that they aimed to recruit more disability advisers in the next funding round. The impact of staff shortages had meant, in the view of one member of a centralised professional support team, that 'we are falling down in the development of individual support plans (Academic inclusion reports)'.

228. Staff from central teams who provide support to students under the integrated learner support model said that they had been under significant pressure, and that they had not been able to offer the level of support they wanted to because of a lack of staff. Staff from multiple teams

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[20] Source: the university's designated data body (DDB) return data.

[21] Source: OfS size and shape of provision data dashboard, students taught and registered by the university in 2021-22, as published on 12 April 2023.

explained to the assessment team that they felt 'crippled by staffing shortages', with staff from one team stating that their team was 'creaking' ... and that it was 'on its knees'. ASSIST staff also explained that, while they could get students through the Disabled Students' Allowance assessment process quite quickly, they were 'falling down' in the development of individual student support plans (Academic Inclusion Plans). The assessment team also heard that one dilemma staff were facing was that if they offered students new things, more students would take them up, and they did not have the resource to cope with this. To address lack of resource, one team said that they had had to be much more focused on where they used their time to have the best impact they could with limited resource.

229. Staff with responsibility for learning development, providing students with academic writing support by going into taught subject sessions within academic courses, also expressed to the assessment team that they felt under-resourced. They stated that they did not feel able to engage with students in the ways they would have wanted to. This team explained that they had the equivalent of 7.5 FTE and nine student mentors, but that they felt they needed 10 FTE staff to address current demand for student support across the whole university.

230. Multiple central support teams explained to the assessment team that staffing pressures had meant that they had had to carefully consider where they spent their time; they confirmed this had negatively impacted students' access to services. They also acknowledged that admitting lots of students with low entry tariffs had exacerbated demand which they felt they did not have the resources to cover.

231. Colleagues from one team said that, because of staffing pressures, their main focus had been on tracking students who had received G grades (i.e., students who had not submitted work, or not produced work of a satisfactory standard to be graded). They said they were not tracking students who received a D grade as this was a pass. Given the issues with student continuation and completion outlined in section B1 of this report, in the assessment team's view this raised questions around the levels of support for computing students who were at risk of failure, non-continuation, and poor attainment – who as a result of this prioritisation may not have been targeted for additional support in this way by this central academic team.

232. Staff from centralised professional support teams told the assessment team that student engagement with centralised learning support was affected by their relationship with the computing faculty. A history of poor relationships with the computing faculty had meant it had been difficult to develop productive relationships to increase student uptake of support. The nature of the relationships between central and faculty teams raised questions for the assessment team about how students were being made aware of the support available to them, and if they were being actively encouraged to attend support sessions.

233. Faculty staff acted as the gatekeepers to support, with the assessment team hearing that support teams relied on faculty staff 'namechecking us and allowing us to engage with the students'. The centralised professional support team explained to the assessment team that they had an 'excellent relationship with faculty teams but have struggled over the last five years to engage with computing, [and that this] failure to engage is the result of legacy leadership and we are hoping that this will change with appointment of new colleagues'. The team explained that the central strategies were dependent on 'academic staff making [centralised professional support teams] relevant… and that if students are not told to use

resources, they won't'. The centralised professional support team qualified that they had managed to engage well with some individual computing staff, and 'had tried lots of ways to forge relationships with the computing faculty but had failed so far'. The team said that there was strong support for their work from their senior line manager but felt that the issue was a programme lead training issue as there needed to be more ownership and oversight of learning support at faculty level to address the current lack of student engagement in learning support.

234. To tackle low levels of student engagement with academic support, one centralised academic support team moved to a new approach to student support, so that instead of individual students signing up to support sessions, the team began embedding support for students in computing taught module sessions to try and ensure greater engagement with students, and enable them to provide support more efficiently given the staffing issues that they had identified. This involved the team visiting module teaching sessions and delivering academic support sessions as part of the taught programme.

235. University data identified a doubling in the numbers of computing students attending focused academic skills support delivered within subject/curriculum sessions for 2019-20 and 2020-21; an increase from 105 to 224 over the two years. However, in 2021-22 the assessment team noted that there had been a reduction of more than 50 per cent in the number of computing students accessing academic support within taught sessions, to 109 from a total of 650 students (see Table 1). The centralised support team explained that they had had to rationalise support given lack of staff resource, and that they had struggled to get engagement from computing staff in promoting academic support.

236. From information provided by the university (Table 10), it was evident to the assessment team that few courses and modules had taken up the offer of embedded skills training. The assessment team identified significant gaps in provision especially in relation to supporting the learning development of Level 5 students. In 2021-22 where the delivery of support had been provided as part of taught provision (i.e., embedded in course delivery), no Level 5 students received additional academic skills support, and yet progression of students from Levels 5 to 6 had been identified as an issue by the faculty (concern 1). Senior faculty staff told the assessment team in meetings with them that 'at Level 4 in 2021-22, 67 students received embedded skills support and yet we are looking at progression [continuation] to Level 5 of high 60s-70 per cent and this should be in the mid-80s. The assessment team's view was that the range of support available (identified in Table 10) seemed insufficient for the nature of the cohort recruited onto computing courses and their needs (as identified in concerns 1, 2, and 7). Outcomes data, set out in concern 1, showed that continuation and progression rates for students in computing were an issue, suggesting that more needed to be done in the form of support. In looking at the data in Table 10, the support offered reaches only a small sector of the computing cohort. In the assessment team's view, this was insufficient to address the needs of the cohort.

237. The academic skills support that was offered, as identified in Table 10, was focused in specific areas (Level 4 Games Art, and Level 4 Esports and Computing) in 2021-22. Given that there were 10 undergraduate computing courses, and four postgraduate taught computing courses, and 90 distinct modules at undergraduate level, the data indicates that few students were

accessing academic support within course delivery. Using the total student numbers enrolled in workshops, participation rates vary from 17 per cent to 36 per cent of the cohort (which is assuming that the numbers indicated in Table 10 represent different students; this may not always be the case as some students may be represented multiple times). However, the assessment team noted that there may have been carry over of skills from attending one session to a student's other modules. The package of support was not comprehensive across the whole computing offer, meaning many students were not accessing academic skills support provided within subject delivery at all. Most of the skills support training for computing students, that was undertaken within modules, was provided in the first semester of the academic year, with limited support in the spring and summer semesters.

Table 10: Student uptake of academic support workshops embedded within courses and numbers of students engaged

Course	Year	Time allocation	Focus of support provided			
			Dissertation support	Academic writing	Using feedback	Learning development introduction
2021-22 N = 109 reached studying (650 students enrolled)						
Level 6 Games Art Dissertation	2021-22	1 hour	29			
Level 4 Esports	2021-22	1 hour online		15		
Level 4 Esports	Dec 2021-22	1 hour online			12	
Level 4 Computing	Dec 2021-22	1 hour		40		
Level 6 Games Art / Design	Feb 2021-22	1 hour	13			
2020-2021 N = 224 (630 students enrolled)						
CSY1020 Computing Level 4	Nov 2020-21	1 hour online / face-to-face		105		
Level 5 all computing	Nov 2020-21	1 hour		11		
MSc Computing	Nov 2020-21	1 hour online		28		

| Course | Year | Time allocation | Focus of support provided | | | |
			Dissertation support	Academic writing	Using feedback	Learning development introduction
CSY2042 Level 5	Nov 2020-21	1 hour		7		
Level 6 Games Art	Dec 2020-21	1 hour	26			
MSc Computing Academic	Feb 2020-21	1 hour		24		
MSc Computing	May 2020-21	1 hour		23		
2019-2020 N = 105 reached (580 students enrolled)						
CSY1020 Computing Level 4	Oct 2019-20	1 hour		99		
CSY2034 Level 5	Nov 2019-20	1 hour		6		

238. Staff from multiple centralised support teams felt that the nature of relationships between their teams and faculty staff in computing was a significant barrier to achieving an embedded model of student support. The assessment team's view was that the incomplete nature of coverage of learning support across computing provision, and lack of support sessions beyond the first semester, were not meeting the particular academic needs of the cohort (B2.3i). It was agreed that students entering with lower entry tariffs were, on the whole, in need of more learning support, that Level 4 computing students struggled in their first year, and that withdrawal rates were particularly high for those with lower entry tariffs, and for those students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintiles 1 and 2).

239. The assessment team found little evidence of a co-ordinated faculty approach to ensure that students had access to appropriate learning support. The centralised professional support team said that there was strong support for their work from their senior line manager. However, they wanted more ownership and oversight of learning support at faculty level to address the level of engagement of programmes and module leads which they thought would make a difference to the lack of take up of learning support by students. To the assessment team this raised questions around faculty leadership in managing the relationship with centralised professional support teams to ensure that all students were aware and able to

access learning support through the curriculum, and through additional focused support available.

240. Members of the Learning Development team felt that the lack of student engagement in learning support was related to how learning support was advertised to students, because computing students were not necessarily using the modes of communication (platforms/apps) where academic support was being advertised. As a consequence of this, many students did not know learning development existed. To try and make students more aware of support available, the Learning Development team set up channels that they thought would be more effective (e.g., a whole computing Discord and Games Discord – a voice, video and text chat app).

241. Students in meetings with the assessment team highlighted competing pressures and lack of time to access learning support. Students had frequently mentioned difficulties in managing workload as a consequence of changes in the university delivery model (as described in concern 1). The assessment team also noted, from discussions with students, competing pressures on their time due to the volume of assessments, and difficulties in accessing software (as set out in concerns 3 and 4). The assessment team's view was that learning support was not seen as a priority by academic staff given the lack of take-up of academic support within course delivery which meant some students who were struggling with their work were not supported to manage their workload.

242. Staff from the centralised professional support teams said that they felt that many students had missed out because they found out about learning support at the end of year one. This would have been too late to help them with managing assessments and contributed to relatively poor continuation rates into Level 5 (as described in concerns 2 and 1 respectively). The appointment of two games students as Learning Development Peer Mentors, and use of social media to enhance student awareness of and engagement in academic support, were examples of new initiatives the university had implemented to support student access to learning support.

243. The faculty's current business plan identified that, in order to deliver on its key performance indicators (KPIs) and targets, closer working was needed with centralised professional services colleagues. The faculty had identified a number of areas where significant support was needed relevant to the areas discussed in this concern; these included:

    i. more support from Student Services to help students with mental health issues and declared additional learning needs

    ii. Integrated Learner Support to support 'with catering for the diversity of students'. Central EDI strategy also identified the need for more local ownership and devolution to programme teams to manage students' diverse needs as outlined in the University Management Team Student EDI minutes, dated 29 March 2023.

The assessment team's view was that the actions above were essential in supporting embedded learning support for students. The assessment team questioned how increased resource from centralised professional support teams might be possible given the current resource issues highlighted by central teams in not having sufficient staffing to manage student needs.

244. The assessment team thought that the provider's commitment to widening student access was admirable but that sufficient resources were not in place to guarantee those students recruited with lower entry tariffs, the level of support that they needed to be successful. The assessment team's view was that that students were not receiving the resources and support they needed to ensure a high quality academic experience (B2.2a.i), and that there were steps that the university had not taken to address the particular academic needs of the cohort (B2.3a.i). This was due to the issues with student continuation as set out in concern 1, and the lack of access to appropriate learning support for some students.

Concern 6 (conditions B2.2a): Ineffective systems and processes impact the effectiveness of academic support

245. Computing staff and centralised professional support staff told the assessment team that there were ongoing difficulties in accessing accurate information on students from the university's data analytics system. This meant that informed decisions about levels of support for students were difficult to make. The assessment team thought this lack of access to data could result in students not receiving sufficient academic support to ensure a high quality academic experience (condition B2.2a.i).

246. The university's data analytics system was relaunched under the name MyEngagement following a cyberattack in March 2021. MyEngagement was designed to provide a visual overview of students' engagement with their studies, with the aim of helping personal tutors (alongside the wider course and module team) to support students. MyEngagement worked by drawing on university data from multiple sources to provide a single engagement rating for a student at any point in time. MyEngagement's primary feeds were student attendance data, e-resources and library loans, student use of the VLE, and QLS (the student records system) for student profile data and assessment grades.

247. Student engagement data was a key element of the university's integrated learner support model, which aimed to ensure that the university was 'super supportive' by ensuring that all its taught students were aware of, and able to access, the full range of support services that the university provided. The integrated learner support model consisted of four main elements involving centralised professional support and course focused professional and academic support (as outlined in paragraph 220, concern 5). Of particular relevance to this concern was the course focused academic support provided by the Personal Academic Tutor module team, and programme leader, because the effectiveness of that professional and academic support was contingent on access to student attendance and engagement data provided.

248. The assessment team found that problems with accessing student data impacted academic and centralised professional support teams' ability to provide an integrated approach to student support. Two specific areas that the assessment team thought were especially compromised by issues with data access were:

    i. management of support for students with additional needs, and

    ii. management of personal academic tutoring impacting the whole cohort.

249. To support students with additional needs, the university has an academic inclusion reports (AIR) policy. This policy sets out that an AIR is a document that 'provides information on a

student's disability, mental health difficulty, health condition, Specific Learning Difference (e.g., dyslexia) or other additional need, the impact of their condition on their ability to undertake study, and details any proposed reasonable adjustments considered appropriate to supporting a student through their studies at the University'. In computing in the academic years 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23, the numbers of computing students with AIRs were 29, 25 and 31 respectively, representing approximately five per cent of the computing student population in each year.

250. The assessment team wanted to know how the university was using student data to understand and evaluate the effectiveness of its AIR policy and requested a summary explaining how actions defined in academic inclusion reports provided to students had been realised, and the university's evaluation of the effectiveness of these actions. In written communication with the assessment team, the university stated: 'We do not have this data… it is not possible to summarise all recommendations made for all students for all years and to further account for how these have been realised or implemented, and how effective these have been.' From the information provided, the assessment team was unable to ascertain what tracking information was being used to ensure students with additional needs were receiving the support that they needed.

251. It is the assessment team's view that the university did not have an effective mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of its approaches for providing sufficient support for students with additional needs because of a lack of availability of key data. For example, the lack of information on how actions defined in AIRs have been realised, and lack of analysis on their effectiveness. The AIR policy and procedure was silent on any form of evaluation of reports, and on measures for assessing effectiveness of the policy itself.

252. In the assessment team's view, the university could have taken more steps to ensure that students with additional needs were receiving sufficient support to enable them to succeed on their courses. The assessment team came to this conclusion because of the lack of evaluation of the nature of support students receive, and of the effectiveness of such support, meant that the university could not properly understand whether this aspect of support was meeting the needs of all of its students, and could not identify areas for enhancement.

253. In considering academic support more widely, and for all students, computing staff and centralised professional support staff acknowledged that issues with access to data made it difficult to track students' engagement with their learning in order to ensure appropriate support. Teaching staff, in meetings with the assessment team, stated they could not rely on MyEngagement to provide them with accurate information on student engagement. Specifically, the assessment team heard that data on student attendance was unreliable, and some staff recorded this data on their own spreadsheets instead. One area in which staff said it was particularly difficult for them to record or access data was student engagement with personal academic tutoring. Centralised professional services staff said that a lack of access to this data was caused by problems with the data analytics system, and with the way in which the process had been set up in the first instance (the data was held by the faculty, and central teams had no direct access to it).

254. The university's 'Integrated Learner Support Policy' states in relation to specialist support teams that 'Mental Health, Counselling, ASSIST, Academic Advice, Finance and Residential

Life support all students through self-referral and via their Personal Academic Tutor'. Staff from the university's centralised academic support teams and the learning and teaching enhancement team told the assessment team that when the university developed its PAT policy, it determined that centralised university teams should not dictate where the PAT data should be held. The assessment team heard that centralised teams did not have visibility of the number of students engaging with PATs with no central database that they could access, meaning they were dependent on data supply from the faculty. Centralised academic support teams said this data was often not forthcoming and/or incomplete in relation to computing students.

255. Module leads interviewed by the assessment team were of the view that issues with access to student engagement data had a significantly negative impact on their efforts to provide appropriate support to students, and increased the administrative burden as they sought to develop alternative ways of tracking student engagement. Computing staff informed the assessment team that the university had been working on MyEngagement (and its previous iteration) for the past five years but that there were still issues with it, and that recording students' engagement with personal academic tutoring had proven problematic. The assessment team therefore decided to explore how students' engagement with personal academic tutoring was recorded at the university in order to determine whether the issue was caused by problems with sharing the data, or with recording it.

256. The assessment team requested data from the university showing how many first year computing students had attended personal academic tutoring meetings during the 2019-20, 2020-21 and 2021-22 academic years, but was informed by the university that it was not possible to provide that data. The university explained that 'University-wide systems implemented to record this information have proved to be unreliable to date and significant data was lost as a result of the cyberattack'. The cyberattack was in March 2021, but conversations between the assessment team and computing staff during the course of the assessment highlighted that issues with availability of data were ongoing and causing additional workload for computing staff in trying to create their own student data records.

257. The university had confirmed, in correspondence with the assessment team, that 'some local records (on student engagement with personal academic tutoring) were maintained but these are not sufficiently consistent to be meaningful'. The assessment team requested to review these documents, and the university provided the assessment team with a set of spreadsheets setting out computing student engagement with personal tutors for four undergraduate courses, and for students studying the integrated foundation year. These records were also incomplete; with records for some courses covering the academic years 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23, but others only covering one or two of these years. Upon reviewing these records, the assessment team found there was no consistent approach to monitoring engagement with personal academic tutoring, and seemingly no expectation on staff of what to record, or about the level of detail required. The assessment team agreed with the university's assessment that these were not consistent (or complete) enough to be meaningful records.

258. The assessment team saw that individual PATs supporting computing students had responded to the issue of a lack of a centralised system to record engagement by creating

their own records at course level, but this was being done in a non-standardised way, with no guidelines on what should be recorded and in which format. The assessment team's view was that the records kept by individual PATs were likely to be of some use to the academic staff members in keeping track of engagement, but that they were not an effective tool that could be used to ensure that students were receiving appropriate support due to their inconsistent nature. These records could not be considered robust and would not allow the university to effectively analyse student engagement with personal academic tutoring across the cohort or assess its effectiveness. Faculty senior leadership said that student tracking data should come through the Deputy Subject Leads, to whom the module leads report. However, faculty senior leadership acknowledged this process was still a work in progress. While records of student engagement with personal academic tutoring existed for some courses, no information at all was available for other courses. In the assessment team's view this corroborated the view from central support teams that personal academic tutoring data from the faculty was often not forthcoming or was incomplete. In the assessment team's view, this meant that the university did not hold complete information on student engagement that would be important in understanding the support needs and uptake among computing students.

259. In exploring the effects of the absence of reliable data on engagement with personal academic tutoring by students and staff, the assessment team heard from module leaders about a number of strategies to provide academic support to students beyond personal academic tutoring. These included a questionnaire as part of onboarding that allowed teams to assess students' capabilities, checking in with students who were not engaging in the first six weeks, and screening to try and determine which students might need extra support. However, the assessment team's view was that, without readily available data on student attendance and engagement with personal academic tutoring, the effectiveness of these strategies would be limited. For example, tracking and pro-active support of students who had disengaged early in their courses would be challenging and would be the responsibility of individual staff, which in the assessment team's view would not be sufficiently robust.

260. The university's personal academic tutoring policy stated that 'Each Faculty must ensure that PATs are equipped to be highly effective in their roles by ensuring that they engage in an appropriate level of staff development; receive an appropriate amount of time and other resource for the role; and have opportunities to engage in continuing development opportunities around the PAT role.' The assessment team's view was that, without adequate recording of students' engagement with personal academic tutoring, the university would not have a clear idea picture of staff engagement with personal academic tutoring to inform staff training priorities.

261. On evaluation processes, the Personal Academic Tutoring policy stated: 'Faculties and Learning and Teaching Enhancement (LTE) should provide a mechanism to ensure that a consistent level of support is offered to all students within the personal academic tutoring system and that good practice is shared'. The assessment team's view was that, given the incomplete and inconsistent data on students' engagement with personal academic tutoring within the faculty, it was not possible for the faculty to ensure that a consistent level of support was offered to all students within personal academic tutoring, as it was unable to accurately establish which students and staff were engaging, and the nature of the support that they

were seeking and giving. The incomplete data provided to the central Learning and Teaching Enhancement team would also make it impossible for the personal academic tutoring process within computing to be evaluated centrally to support the effectiveness of an integrated model and would limit efforts to share best practice.

262. Information supplied by the university stated that at Level 4: 'Opportunities for students to meet with their PAT are provided but many programme leaders report that students do not often take up the opportunity, unless they are facing a significant challenge'. Individual students in module evaluations had also commented on not being offered personal academic tutoring, and, in discussions with the assessment team, commented that the onus on setting up a meeting was on the student. The assessment team's view was that not having complete data available on student engagement with personal academic tutoring limited the university's effectiveness in being able to identify those students most at risk of academic failure due to low engagement, and delayed opportunities to put in place appropriate support.

263. The relatively low levels of uptake by students of personal academic tutoring meetings, acknowledged by the university, raised questions for the assessment team about whether students were clear about what support was available to them. The assessment team reviewed student-facing documentation; they were unable to confirm what the annual entitlement to personal academic tutoring sessions (in hours) was from that information (including handbooks, the personal academic tutoring policy, and webpages). The assessment team also found that this information was unclear on what the role of the student was in the process. Due to prioritising other areas for focus, the assessment team did not discuss the absence of student-facing information on personal academic tutoring entitlement in handbooks and webpages with university staff in detail. However, the assessment team thought that it was an area that the university may wish to address in future, especially given issues raised about lack of clear communication about support available (detailed in concern 5).

264. The assessment team's view was that it would be reasonable to expect the university to have a robust mechanism for tracking student engagement with their personal academic tutors. This is because personal academic tutoring was a core element of the university's integrated learner support model, playing an important role in both direct provision of academic support, and in referring students to, or raising their awareness of, the other support services that the university offers. It was the assessment team's view that the university did not have such a mechanism for accurately tracking students' engagement with personal academic tutoring engagement, and that this impacted staff capacity to make informed decisions about whether the support needs of students were being met. The assessment team's view was that the ongoing data issues impacted the capacity of the integrated learner support model to effectively support all students. More widely, data access and data management issues affected the ability of the university to evaluate the effectiveness of personal academic tutoring, and wider support services, due to the absence of complete student records (for example, attendance data, data on engagement with relevant services, and outcomes of interventions).

265. A key issue identified by the assessment team was the lack of clarity around the management of student data, and how this information was shared with centralised teams providing student

support. In concern 5, central teams had said that a lack of resource had meant they had had to prioritise the support they gave, so they were tracking students with G grades but not tracking those with D grades (paragraph 231). Central professional teams told the assessment team that they did not have access to some of the student records managed by faculty so could not use this to make informed decisions around provision. Similarly, at the faculty level, PATs explained to the assessment team that computing's course leaders discussed vulnerable students with them but that this was done informally, and that there was no formal process for this. The assessment team asked how PATs looked at trend data to identify potentially 'at risk' students, PATs said that the system (MyEngagement) and associated processes did not allow them to do that because 'it hasn't worked in the 5 years… nothing talks to each other'.

266. The assessment team considered that issues with access to student engagement data would impact PATs' abilities to accurately track student engagement, and that of central teams to co-ordinate centralised academic support. The assessment team were also of the view that issues relating to data management and processes, and access to data, all could work against the concept of an integrated learner support model. Data management issues meant that the university was too reliant on student self-referrals to support services, which the assessment team did not feel would be appropriate, as some students may not be aware of the support mechanisms on offer or may not be comfortable referring themselves.

267. The assessment team's view was that issues with lack of access to accurate data, impacting effective monitoring and support of students, related to the requirements of condition B2.3. The assessment team's view was that given the data limitations previously described in this concern it would be difficult to accurately track those students who needed most support. Given the numbers of students who had withdrawn from courses (paragraph 47), the assessment team's view was that there were further steps that the university could have taken to support these students. The judgement of the assessment team was based on the particular needs of the university's computing cohort in relation to their prior academic attainment and capability in relation to the academic support provided. The particular academic needs of the university's computing cohort have been identified in previous sections of this report. The university is a 'widening participation' provider and many of the cohort were entering university from non-traditional backgrounds. The university had identified issues, especially for new Level 4 students, in managing transitions into higher education. There were significant issues for computing, with associated continuation concerns (from Level 4 to Level 5 of study), overall progression concerns for students from Levels 5-6, withdrawal rates of students, and attendance (as identified in concerns 1 and 2). Given the needs of the cohort, it would be expected that effective monitoring and support systems would be in place to ensure students receive the appropriate levels of support.

268. The assessment team concluded that there are further steps that the university could have taken to ensure that computing students were receiving support sufficient for the purposes of ensuring high quality academic experience, or to enable them to succeed on their courses. The assessment team's judgement was based on the lack of an effective system for monitoring uptake of personal academic tutoring which meant that the university could not be sure that personal academic tutoring, which it has positioned as an important component of

its integrated learner support model, was meeting the academic support needs of students, both directly and indirectly by signposting or referring students to additional services.

269. At the time of the assessment, university senior leadership stated that the MyEngagement system was working at 70 to 80 per cent effectiveness, and acknowledged that while system owners might be happy with this, the users (in this case, PATs within computing) would not be. Information provided by the university in May 2023 stated that the feeds into MyEngagement from the VLE, QLS, and on e-resources and library loans, were now stable. While the student attendance feed into MyEngagement was now stable, early issues with the attendance application and quality of data had resulted in some staff reverting to local recording of attendance (outside of the system). Many computing staff, in meetings with the assessment team, felt that MyEngagement was not effective in providing them with accurate data to enable them to make informed decisions as to how best to support students.

270. The assessment team was provided with information on several steps that the university had taken to improve reliability of and access to data on engagement with personal academic tutoring, and of other forms of student engagement and academic support. Senior faculty leadership highlighted that the appointment of a new permanent Head of Subject (who joined the university in 2022-23) had already had a positive impact on the establishment of supporting structures, monitoring and recording within computing in relation to personal academic tutoring provision. Faculty leadership also confirmed that the faculty was working on developing a central system for recording personal academic tutoring data, outside of MyEngagement, due to the difficulties with the implementation of the system. The assessment team considered it was too early to assess the impact of this post, and of the proposed new system to record personal academic tutoring data, given that the head of subject post was new, and that the system was only at the planning stage.

271. In a summary of development actions for MyEngagement provided by the university, the assessment team saw that the university had a cross-institutional MyEngagement Steering Group, that was making suggestions to improve the system. Staff training was being provided, and MyEngagement was included on the PAT process for academic staff. The summary also stated that, from September 2023, regular MyEngagement reports would be provided to the faculty executive, providing the frequency of usage, and that a separate steering group was being set up to focus on attendance recording. The assessment team also heard that the university was in the process of replacing the QLS student records system as part of a three-year project to help faculties with their access to data, to address the MyEngagement problems that existed at the time. However, delays with installing the new student records management system (SITS) were outlined by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Chief Financial Officer at the January 2023 Board of Governors meeting. The assessment team viewed the development actions as positive, and thought that with appropriate management may be able to address the issues outlined above. However, at the time of the assessment it was too early to determine any impact in addressing the concerns identified above.

272. In summary, it was the assessment team's view that the university could have taken more steps to ensure each cohort of students received resources and support which were sufficient to ensure a high quality academic experience (B2.2): university-level systems had not worked

effectively to ensure staff had access to data to provide appropriate levels of support for all students.

B2 conclusions

273. The assessment team's view was that on balance, there are further steps that the university could have taken to ensure that each cohort of students taught on the computing courses (identified in paragraph 18) consistently received sufficient resources and academic support for the purpose of ensuring they received a high quality academic experience, and that those students would succeed in higher education and beyond, as required under ongoing condition B2.2.a.i and ii.

274. In relation to concern 3, and the provision of specialist space and equipment for games computing students, the faculty's business plan confirmed that 'specialist space remains stretched in some areas'. The assessment team heard that higher specification computers were being set up on campus and that plans were being considered to increase the specification of university supplied laptops for future cohorts (paragraph 190). The assessment team thought these initiatives would address some of the key issues that games students had reported. However, the assessment team found there to be an ongoing concern – for both students and staff – surrounding access to software and getting it updated on student laptops and university machines in a timely way.

275. In relation to concern 4, the assessment team identified that access to essential software was an issue for all computing students, and that there was a conflict between centrally managed IT security practices, and meeting computing students' IT needs (paragraphs 213-216). The assessment team heard from university staff that progress was being made to ensure more timely remediation of computing students' software support and general IT needs (paragraph 217). The assessment team's view was that these were positive steps; however, some areas were still a work in progress, and it was too early to assess whether they would be sufficient to address all of the concerns outlined above.

276. In relation to concern 5, the assessment team identified issues relating to adequacy of centralised academic support staffing, lack of computing student uptake of central academic support, and complex relationships between central and faculty teams. These issues impacted the effectiveness of initiatives to support students. The assessment team noted that the recent appointments of key leadership staff within the faculty and computing were seen as positive moves by central teams to promote more collaborative practice. In addition, the faculty business plan outlined the need for closer working relationships to enhance academic support for computing students. The assessment team saw these initiatives as positive, but it was too early to make a judgement on their effectiveness as they were at an early stage. At the time of assessment, computing student engagement with central academic support was relatively limited, and the assessment team saw a lack of adequate staffing in central academic support positions as an ongoing concern.

277. In relation to concern 6, the assessment team noted ongoing work by the university to enhance the operational capacity of the MyEngagement analytics system. This work was to improve integrated learning support between central and faculty-based staffing teams and increase the effectiveness of the personal academic tutoring process. The assessment team's

view was that, at the time of assessment, systems and processes were not working as effectively as they might; this meant that effective tracking of students who may have been at risk of academic failure was not as effective as it could have been. In conversations with the assessment team, computing staff talked about ongoing issues with trying to access accurate data on their students, impacting their effectiveness to manage student needs.

278. Considering the information above, the assessment team's view was that the university could have taken further steps to ensure that the students on the courses in question received resources and support sufficient to succeed in and beyond higher education. Additional steps that could have been taken included, but were not limited to:

- Ensuring student access to specialist equipment by ringfencing access to specialist resource space for games computing students.

- Building closer working relationships between faculty and central support teams to better co-ordinate support, and to ensure that students were more aware of support available.

- Addressing data management system issues to enable more effective tracking of students' progress with their learning.

- Ensuring a more consistent approach at faculty level to monitoring student and tutor engagement in personal academic tutoring, and clarifying roles and responsibilities with personal academic tutoring.

279. In conclusion, based on the existing position at the time of the assessment, the team found the university was not consistently providing a high quality academic experience for those students on courses identified in paragraph 18. This was because:

- **Concern 3: There was limited access to resources that would support games students' independent learning** (paragraphs 169-194). The assessment team's view was that limited access to, and inadequate support for, specialist learning resources (physical spaces, equipment and software) meant that games students had not received the resources and support which were sufficient for the purpose of ensuring a high quality academic experience (B2.2a.i). The assessment team found the lack of access to key resources for games students had cumulative negative impacts (e.g., attendance, sense of belonging, ability to meet deadlines and to do their best work). The assessment team noted that games students' lack of access to resources could have particularly affected those from lower socioeconomic groups.

- **Concern 4: Students had insufficient access to specialist learning resources** (paragraphs 195-218). The assessment team's view is that computing students had insufficient access to specialist learning resources for the purpose of ensuring a high quality academic experience (B2.2a.i).The assessment team found ongoing issues in relation to resolution of physical space, and software access and IT support for computing students. The faculty Business Plan highlighted that specialist resource spaces remained stretched in some areas and that deployment of specialist software remained challenging. The assessment team acknowledged the cumulative impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the cyberattack on the university's ability to meet the needs of its students. However, the assessment team's view was that the robust security measures introduced by the university during and following the 2021 cyberattack had a significant negative effect on

the academic experience of computing students. The assessment team found that insufficient measures were taken by the university to support computing students' specialist learning requirements. This had negative impacts on students' abilities to study and complete assessments (paragraphs 197-202). The assessment team also found that there were additional steps that the university could have taken to ensure that students received sufficient resources to enable them to succeed and ensure a high quality academic experience (B2.3).

- **Concern 5: There was limited academic learning support for computing students** (paragraphs 219-244). The assessment team's view was that learning support provided by centralised professional services was limited. This meant academic support had to be streamlined which, given the nature of the intake of computing students with diverse needs, led the assessment team to question whether the needs of all computing students were being met. This suggested that resource was not sufficient to ensure a high quality academic experience for computing students (B2.2a.i). Data on student use of centralised academic support confirmed that the uptake of academic learning support by computing students was low, which was especially problematic given the data on student continuation and progression. The assessment team's view was that students who would have benefited from academic support were not receiving it, and that the university could have taken more steps to ensure the particular academic needs of the cohort of students had been attended to (B2.3a).

- **Concern 6: Ineffective systems and processes impacted the effectiveness of academic support for students** (paragraphs 245-272). The assessment team's view was that university-level systems to support an integrated learner support system had not worked effectively. It is the assessment team's view that the university did not have an effective mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of its approaches for providing sufficient support for students with additional needs because of a lack of availability of key data. The relative lack of effectiveness of elements of the integrated learner support system meant that students may not have received support that was sufficient for the purpose of ensuring a high quality academic experience (B2.2a.i). Difficulties in being able to access reliable data on student engagement had impacted the efficacy of tracking approaches to ensure students' needs were addressed. The university did not have an effective mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of its approaches for providing sufficient support for students with additional needs because of a lack of availability of key data (paragraph 251). The assessment team's view was that the lack of a co-ordinated approach to evaluating the effectiveness of learning support and the managing and implementing personal academic tutoring meant that there were more steps that the university could have taken to meet the academic needs of each cohort of students. Meeting these needs should be based on prior academic attainment and capability (B2.3a.i), and the principle that the greater the academic needs of the cohort of students, the more significant the number and nature of the steps to be taken become (B2.3a.ii).

Condition B4: Assessment and awards

280. The assessment team reviewed a range of evidence in relation to condition B4 (see the full text in Annex A), in seeking to understand whether:

- students on the relevant courses were 'assessed effectively' (B4.2.a)

- each assessment was 'valid and reliable' (B4.2.b)

- academic regulations were 'designed to ensure that relevant awards are credible' (B4.2.c)

- 'relevant awards granted to students are credible' (B4.2.e).

281. The assessment team had concerns that may relate to compliance with some of the requirements set out in condition B4.2. The relevant requirements are:

B4.2 Without prejudice to the principles and requirements provided for by any other condition of registration and the scope of B4.1, the provider must ensure that:

    a. students are assessed effectively

282. The assessment team also particularly noted the following definitions listed under B4.4:

    c. "assessed effectively" means assessed in a challenging and appropriately comprehensive way, by reference to the subject matter of the higher education course, and includes but is not limited to:

        i. providing stretch and rigour consistent with the level of the course;

        ii. testing relevant skills; and

        iii. assessments being designed in a way that minimises the opportunities for academic misconduct and facilitates the detection of such misconduct where it does occur.

283. The assessment team considered that a range of information related to assessment and awards was relevant to computing courses at the University of Northampton. This included:

- a review of a sample of assessment briefs and marking rubrics

- a sample of marked student coursework with feedback

- module attainment data.

284. Based on the information reviewed in the scope of this quality assessment, the team did not identify any concerns in relation to the following requirements set out in condition B4.2:

- Each assessment is valid and reliable (B4.2.b)

- Academic regulations are designed to ensure that relevant awards are credible (B4.2.c)

- In respect of each higher education course, that academic regulations are designed to ensure the effective assessment of technical proficiency in the English language in a manner which appropriately reflects the level and content of the applicable higher education course (B4.2.d)

- Relevant awards granted to students are credible at the point of being granted and when compared to those granted previously (B4.2.e).

Concern 7 (condition B4.2a): Assessment information and feedback to students on assessment tasks are insufficient to enable all students to use it effectively to inform their work

285. The assessment team identified concerns about assessment and feedback. Some students did not receive adequate information to inform the development of their work for future assessments. This could have meant that the requirements of condition B4.2a had not been met. More specifically, the assessment team identified that aspects of teaching provision relating to assessment processes might have meant that the university was not assessing students in a challenging and appropriately comprehensive way, by reference to the subject matter of the higher education course.

286. The datasets considered in relation to condition B4.2 included:

- assessment information provided to students, such as assessment briefs, including rubrics, module and course information on formative and summative assessment, university and faculty assessment grading schemes and an associated university algorithm.

- assessment information in handbooks and on the VLE

- student module evaluations; FAST away day evaluation data; student-staff liaison committee minutes

- data on assessment processes

- reviews of online summative feedback provided to students

- assessment outcomes data for students

- student complaints

- external examiner reports.

287. The assessment team identified concerns about effective assessment across a number of linked areas of curriculum design. This included feedback to students, which is relevant to their understanding of what they need to do to meet course and associated module learning outcomes successfully.

288. The assessment team's concerns also extended to summative assessment, and the extent to which summative feedback helped students to apply feedback to future work. Feedback of this sort can develop students' understanding of what is required for future assessments.

Assessment briefings and formative feedback to students was insufficient to help students prepare for future assessments

289. The assessment team acknowledged from discussions with computing staff that formative feedback to support students' understanding of assessment requirements to inform their future work could take many different forms. The assessment team found it difficult to navigate what formative assessment feedback was available to students on the VLE and how

staff were giving feedback to support future work. A lack of clarity about what constituted formative assessment in module outlines was identified. The assessment team concluded that it would have been difficult for students to know what formative feedback they were entitled to, and what their role in it was, from the course and module information that they looked at.

290. The team also examined the following data: the NSS, module evaluations and discussions with computing staff and students. This revealed marked differences in student experiences of formative assessment feedback. Some modules used practice time-controlled assessments, prior to students undertaking the summative assessment to support them in knowing what they needed to improve upon. Others reported on the use of continuous assessments and integrated class activities to support student learning.

291. The assessment team noted that scores on the NSS item 'I have received helpful feedback on my work' had significantly improved (from 57 per cent to 72 per cent between 2021 and 2022). However, in looking at student concerns about the effectiveness of assessment, the assessment team identified several themes from looking at the NSS and other forms of feedback from students:

- Information coming too late to be of use to students, meaning that even if a student had worked hard throughout the course they would need to replace most of the work they had done as it would not be relevant.

- Information not being explained sufficiently and not coming at the right time, which meant that students felt that they could not achieve the best outcomes.

- What was taught did not aways align with what was being assessed.

- An emphasis on independent learning (referenced in concern 1) was felt to be unhelpful when some students had limited knowledge of the subject area. However, some students in NSS feedback also commented on how much they valued the freedom to learn independently (n = 7).

292. Overall, the assessment team found more negative comments than positive ones on students' perceptions of feedback, with over three times more negative comments than positive comments about support received. The assessment team found quite large differences in students' experiences from its review of student module evaluations and other data. It also found that 59 per cent of the module feedback that it examined was poor quality. This suggested that, in a substantial proportion of modules, students were not being assessed effectively, given the lack of feedback support available. In discussions with the assessment team, senior university staff confirmed that – despite there being excellent examples of formative feedback – it was not present in some modules across the university. Computing module leads commented that standards for formative assessment had slipped as new staff had joined the computing team and taken over specific modules. This meant that students had not been receiving formative feedback on all of their modules, impacting the effectiveness of assessment to support students' learning.

293. In student module evaluations, responses from computing students to the statement: 'I have received helpful comments on my work', the proportion of responses in the two highest categories (1 or 2 on the 5-point Likert scale – i.e., those who were most in agreement with

this statement) varied from 29 per cent to 100 per cent across a sample of 21 modules, reflecting the patterns in NSS feedback. At Levels 4 and 5, a mixed pattern of responses across modules was identified, suggesting variations in quality of feedback processes across modules. The proportion of responses in categories 1 or 2 was 50 per cent or less in four modules, and was 75 per cent or more in four modules. At Level 6, the proportion of responses in categories 1 or 2 was over 75 per cent in two modules and 50 per cent or less in two modules. In cases where students reported that their feedback experiences had been poor, they mentioned late access to resources: they did not feel that they had enough information to develop their work sufficiently in time for summative assessments (as previously identified in concern 2).

294. The assessment team found that students were unclear about requirements in some of the group-focused assessment modules. Feedback from students in one module said that the 'structure of the [assessment] brief is a mess… Needs to be clear from the start what is expected' (Level 6 module). In a Level 5 module, a student commented on the lack of sufficient information to guide their work, requesting more information about what was needed to be included in an assignment.

295. Level 6 students, in two of the module evaluations sampled, noted the need for more information on what was required in dissertations. The assessment team found guidance documentation and resources on the VLE relating to the dissertation limited. Guidelines – while clear about the role of student and supervisor in the dissertation process – provided little concrete guidance on what the learning outcomes meant in the context of writing a report/dissertation, especially around theory, methodology and analysis. The assessment team reviewed online information but found this to be at a low entry level, and not sufficient to provide students with a good understanding of different methodologies (including methods of analysis). This corroborated the assessment team's view that the VLE did not have enough information to support students' understanding of dissertation requirements.

296. The assessment team thought this was an example of the university not assessing students effectively. Without clear instruction and provision of appropriate resources, students would have been hampered in developing their work to the level required. This meant that students might not have been challenged in an appropriate way, by not being directed to the higher-level learning that they needed to focus on. Students acknowledged in student-staff liaison minutes that the introduction of a 'graded dissertation draft was generally a good idea'. The course team agreed the need to review the quality of information for Level 6 students, and the need to review how Level 4 and 5 students were being prepared for the standards required at Level 6.

297. Some students in NSS and module evaluation feedback commented that they did not have the information they needed to complete assignments, and that staff had not provided sufficient examples to inform their learning (also identified in concern 2). Level 6 students commented that module leads were late in discussing assessment details with them, which limited their opportunities to develop their assessment practice. Level 6 students in module evaluation feedback identified the need for earlier assessment support, better group assessment processes, and better guidance to support understanding of assessment requirements. A student in one module requested clearer guidance, and the need to 'release

proper revision materials'. In another module, a student commented that the assessment criteria needed to make what was required for 'excellent' clearer (concern 2) and that, to get a clearer perspective on the quality required, they needed exemplars of previous students' work.

298. The assessment team's view was that students' needs for more explicit guidance was linked to the relatively poor quality of the rubrics identified in concern 2. In the worst examples, a student would have found it difficult to have a clear idea of assessment requirements. As such, this indicated that the university was not assessing its students effectively.

The quality of written feedback was insufficient to support students' performance on future assessments

299. The assessment team found that written feedback students had received – on summative assessments, submitted on the online VLE system, demonstrated that some students were not being assessed effectively. From a review of feedback on a sample of 29 assessments (involving 26 modules across Levels 4 to 7), the assessment team found the quality of feedback good in four assessments, poor in 17, and mixed in three (some good and poor quality elements). Feedback was not found on the online system for five assessments, which was related to the timing of the review. At masters' level, feedback quality was found to be poor in all four of the modules reviewed. The assessment team found only nine modules that used rubrics to demonstrate how marks had been awarded; and where this was done, it was of variable quality. This meant that, in an approximate 40 per cent sample of core computing modules, feedback was found to be poor by the assessment team in 59 per cent.

300. The assessment team's view was that students were not being assessed effectively, as the written feedback provided on assessments was not sufficient to enable them to progress their learning. Concerns included but were not limited to:

- a lack of information provided in written feedback on how a student could improve their work

- information given in a form that, in the opinion of the assessment team, would not be easily accessible to some students

- written feedback not sufficiently related to the assessment criteria

- written feedback where the descriptors used to describe the level of performance did not align with the university grading system, which the assessment team thought would create confusion.

301. Seven modules within the assessment team's sample were time-controlled assessments (TCAs), which may comprise short answer questions. The team found that computer-generated marks on TCAs led to greater consistency in how information was presented to the student on their work. However, this written feedback consisted of an overarching mark with no explanation of results for students to learn from. The university confirmed that students also received real-time feedback on correct and wrong answers, along with pre-recorded feedback on questions answered incorrectly, and feedback during workshop sessions with staff. The assessment team did not request further information on these other modes of feedback so were not able to comment on the efficacy of them.

302. The team found multiple examples of feedback from computing staff – across assessment types and grade boundaries – that gave students limited explanations about how they could improve. These examples were typically either or both unclear or lacked enough detail. In the assessment team's view, the relatively poor quality of feedback indicated that the staff were not assessing the students effectively. Examples included:

- In assigning an A+ grade to a student, module feedback read: 'The report is good but it is short. There is more that could have been explained better and expanded on'. There is no elaboration of what could be done better and how.

- In assigning a C- grade to a student at masters' level, module feedback read: 'Code explanation in video demo not very convincing. Hence, you were called to viva-voce. Viva performance was not very convincing too.' The assessment team's view was that explanations stating that work was not convincing would not have helped a student to understand what they needed to do to improve.

- For group feedback on one module, for a D+ mark: 'You've made a fair attempt and it's good to see that you've had a go at all the tasks. It has quite a lot of promise but doesn't deliver it all and the piece is inconsistent.' The assessment team thought it would have been difficult for students to know why their work did not deliver from the feedback provided.

303. In some cases, staff gave feedback using unclear, abstract or inaccessible language that would have proved especially difficult or alienating given that many of the university's computing students came from non-traditional backgrounds. For example:

- For a D grade: 'Submission is not based on module content or assessment requirements. Much of the code is inefficient due to poor practice. However, the presentation demonstrate an attempt to dliever [sic] the requirements and the submission is individual for a group assignment.'

- For an F grade: 'Generally a limited attempt, with poor practise and a range of syntax and integrity errors. Tables specification, queries, validation and demo not included. To pass this submission also needs improved referential integrity.'

- For a G grade: 'write in 3rd person impersonal 32% individuality is getting high its [sic] a start, it needs to be longer and there should be more references.'

304. The assessment team found that the extent to which the information would be accessible to students and enable them to know what they needed to do to improve their work, was questionable.

305. The sample of work that the assessment team looked at often contained insufficient information for students about how marks were allocated. Knowing how marks were allocated would have helped students to understand where they needed to focus in improving their performance. Understanding how a mark has been derived – which elements of one's work is good and what aspects need to be delivered differently – is an essential part of being assessed effectively.

306. The assessment team noted that the information available to students contained many potential points of confusion (some of which have been noted in concern 2). In one case, the

information available to students did not explain how the marks they had received had been constructed against the assessment criteria. For example, in 29 assessments related to 26 modules, five contained no rubrics, and a further six had no breakdown of marks. Fourteen of these 29 had rubrics with indicative content on knowledge and skills assessments; only nine of these demonstrated the breakdown of student marks within the rubric.

307. The written feedback students received also contained limited reference to the assessment criteria. This would have helped to explain the strengths and limitations of their work in relation to the assessment requirements.

308. A third point of confusion included a lack of alignment between university assessment grade descriptors for work of different standards, and the nature of the feedback given in relation to the mark awarded. The university assessment grading system used the following overarching university assessment grade descriptors:

- Distinguished – very high quality (A grades)

- Merit – high quality (B grades)

- Commended – sound quality (C grades)

- Pass – satisfactory (D grades)

- Fail (F)

- G grades – academic misconduct, late submission, non-submission.

309. These descriptors and related alternative terms were used by computing staff sometimes to mean the same, and, at other times, different grade levels (as identified in concern 2). The assessment team found, across most of the sample of written feedback looked at, that staff made little reference to the assessment criteria descriptors in their feedback. This was the case even for modules that had rubrics. The assessment team also found a lack of alignment between the descriptor used in feedback provided to students and the mark awarded. The assessment team's view was that this lack of clarity and lack of alignment would be confusing for students in trying to work out what they needed to do to be successful (as indicated in NSS survey responses). For example:

- For an A+ grade: 'The application is good. Unfortunately, the report is not at the same standard as the application. The code is not explained as expected. Also, there are no screenshots of the application activities' (Level 6, module 1). The assessment team's view was that the feedback did not seem congruent with the descriptors for an A grade.

- For a B grade: 'a decent grasp of what was required.' To the assessment team, there was no clarity around what was required.

- For a B grade: 'The presentation shows impressive and excellent attention to detail in the aesthetic and structural design of the presentation… - A sound use of evidence-based literature … The evidence-based literature used was soundly justified.' To the assessment team the use of 'sound' denotes a C grade according to the university's grading system. It could have been that an element of the work was at a lower grade, but the feedback did not show where the student had met specific criteria in relation to key knowledge and skills identified in the rubric.

- For a B- grade: 'The report was a bit too basic. Whilst there was a flavour of what was involved the whole thing lacked detail. I was hoping you'd expand on the points that you made.' The assessment team found little in the way the feedback was written which would have indicated to a student that the work was a B grade.

- For a C grade: 'The application is acceptable. Part of the login has been hardcoded which shouldn't be the same case. The export file name has also been hard coded. The link between the products and categories is missing. Also, the IDs for the categories are being created manually which is bad practice for the application. The ID should be incremented automatically'. The assessment team's view was that the feedback provided clarity on what the student needed to improve on but there was little reference to this work being of sound/commendable quality as per the university assessment grade descriptors.

- For an F+ grade: 'Some commendable effort made in the report although emphasis is placed on some irrelevant sections. Implementation has high similarity rate and does not pass the pass threshold. The submitted portfolio is missing several deliverables as required by the brief'. The assessment team thought the feedback was very limited in supporting a student to know what they needed to do to improve their work.

310. The assessment team's view was that some of the ways in which staff applied grading descriptors, (and in some cases, did not apply them) across different modules could have left students confused about what they needed to do to develop their work (e.g., satisfactory was used in different modules to describe both a C and D grade).

311. The team found that students did not have sufficient information to make informed decisions about how to develop their work, given the lack of clarity evidenced in the assessment information provided to students and associated rubrics.

312. The assessment team found evidence of relatively poor feedback across all levels (4 to 7). It was especially concerned about the poor quality of feedback observed in the sample of masters' modules, where the nature of feedback to students was extremely limited. Information provided to students (for example, the MSc final report guidance) lacked detail. Teaching materials, such as video clips on research methodology, provided only basic information about the level of study. Module descriptors did not emphasise the need for originality, which is expected for work at this level.

313. The assessment team noted significant differences in the quality of assessment information provided to students in different modules. This meant that, in some modules, students did not have sufficient information to inform their learning and were therefore not being assessed effectively. The Learning Design team explained that rubrics had been designed primarily for marking and not to support student learning, and that it was the responsibility of programme leads to check quality. Undergraduate programme leads confirmed that it was their responsibility to ensure institutional requirements were met.

314. However, the assessment team thought that assuring consistent standards of assessment feedback lacked leadership oversight. The team's view was that the lack of investment in academic leadership training and development identified in concern 1 (paragraphs 96-99) had resulted in the relatively poor quality of assessment information identified in concern 2 (paragraph 146-151), and inconsistency in the quality of feedback in this concern.

315. The central learning design teams confirmed that the university had struggled with evaluation processes and particularly around assessment design. The assessment team noted that rubrics were rarely used to show students how marks had been allocated. The assessment team found that course improvement planning and module lead evaluation of student feedback demonstrated little thorough analysis of data to inform course development including the role of assessment in this. Central senior staff told the assessment team that the university was going to place greater emphasis on enhancing feedback practice given the feedback from students on this issue.

316. The assessment team noted that only three of the 17 external examiner reports for 2020-21 and 2021-22 observed variable quality of feedback to students. Six commented on the high quality of feedback. Two external examiners mentioned the need for module leads to make the marking schemes of assessment clearer to students as part of the assessment briefs, and to differentiate more clearly between knowledge and skills within rubrics. In fact, of the 17 external examiner reports, 13 strongly agreed and four broadly agreed that 'the quality and quantity of written feedback to students on their assessed work is consistent and appropriate'. However, the assessment team identified from a sample of feedback from approximately 40 per cent of core computing modules that the quality of feedback was poor in 59 per cent of these (paragraphs 299-312). The assessment team questioned whether the external examining process was working as well as it might to support the faculty in ensuring students were being assessed effectively.

317. The assessment team had sampled a significant number of modules and found good and very poor practice. It noted that the switch from paper copy reports to a revised online version of the report for 2021-22 seemed to correspond with external examiners giving less feedback; most gave no expanded feedback on key aspects of practice. The assessment team found a lack of insight and criticality in feedback from external examiners. For example, one external commented positively on the use of rubrics for grading but said nothing about the relative quality of them. In external examiner reports for 2020-21 and 2021-22, ten of the 17 external examiners had not met online or face-to-face with any students. One external examiner had asked for more guidance about exam board practice, another expressed the need to have access to complete sets of assessment information, and a third said greater consistency in how information was organised across modules would have been helpful.

318. The number of modules external examiners were reviewing varied from three to 27. The assessment team could see the value of looking at modules across a course, but where external examiners looked at more than 15 modules it raised questions about how far they could scrutinise a student's work.

319. In summary, the assessment team would have expected to see greater scrutiny of assessment and feedback in external examiner reports (both positive and negative). The team accepted that it had focused on a sample of external examiner reports, but it did not think the external examining process was working as well as it could have done. The team saw a relative lack of depth and analysis in the assessment and feedback. It concluded therefore that these reports did not support access to a high quality academic experience.

320. Senior leadership staff, in meetings with the assessment team, commented that they had prioritised feedback as a concern across the university (paragraph 154), given their own

analysis of student comments and wider evaluation processes, but plans had not been actioned at the time of the assessment team's review. The university had an overarching student experience and NSS improvement action plan, as referenced in the minutes of the October 2022 governing body meeting. Plans involved 'changes to modular feedback to make it faster, more responsive, more dialogic, and promoting staff agency, marked as being piloted in 2021-22 and moving to full implementation in 2022-23.' However, the assessment team found no evidence that these plans had affected processes in computing at the time of the investigation. Feedback was being looked at, not because of feedback scores, but due to the nature of student comments.

321. In the assessment team's view, the university had not ensured that all students had been assessed in a challenging and appropriately comprehensive way, by reference to the subject matter of the higher education course (condition B4.2a). This is because students had insufficient assessment and feedback information to enable them to be clear about assessment requirements – to prepare effectively for final assessments, and to be able to focus on high level knowledge and skills. The assessment team concluded that information provided to students in assessment guidance, in some module assessment briefs and associated rubrics, and in feedback they received from computing staff, would not have been sufficient in supporting students' learning and acquisition of high level skillsets.

322. The assessment team also considered that its findings could have wider implications for the validity and reliability of assessments, and the credibility of relevant awards. The concerns identified could indicate an issue with validity of assessment because the lack of alignment of assessment tasks and course learning outcomes can mean that the design of assessment does not test in practice the things it should be assessing. Reliability could also be an issue. Staff may award students different grades for the same quality of work across modules depending on how they have interpreted and applied the assessment grading descriptors. Therefore, assessment may not be consistent between students. The credibility of awards may be an issue in that the relevant awards might not accurately reflect students' knowledge and skills. Because of prioritisation and limited resource, it was not possible for the assessment team to explore these issues at this time.

B4 conclusions

323. The assessment team's view was that, on balance, the University of Northampton had not ensured that all computing students had been assessed effectively (condition B4.2a).

324. In relation to concern 7, the assessment team noted that the university had prioritised assessment information and feedback as a concern across the university, but these plans had not been actioned at the time of the assessment team's review. As noted in concern 2, the university's intention was to consider themes about feedback, but these had not been developed at the time of the investigation (paragraph 154).

325. It is the view of the assessment team that the emphasis on improving the quality of assessment information and feedback to students was important, given the issues identified above in paragraphs 289-322.

326. In conclusion, based on the position at the time of the assessment, the team found that students were not being assessed effectively in computing because:

- **Concern 7:** Assessment information and feedback to students on assessment tasks were insufficient to enable all students to use it effectively to inform their work (discussed in paragraphs 289-322). The assessment team reviewed a substantive number of modules within computing. It found that staff were not always providing students with sufficient information about the knowledge, understanding and skills that they needed to master to meet the required learning outcomes (paragraphs 289-298).

- The assessment team while identifying high quality feedback also found that lack of consistency in the quality of feedback provision in both formative and summative assessments meant that feedback was insufficient to support students' learning in over 50 per cent of the modules reviewed (paragraphs 299-322). Written feedback from staff in some modules was insufficient to support students' realisation of the course learning outcomes; the impact of which would have been most profound on those needing most support (paragraph 48). The view of the assessment team was that not providing all students with sufficient guidance to inform the development of their work for final assessment indicated that the university was not assessing its students effectively (B4.2a).

- The assessment team found that the university needed to improve the quality of its evaluation processes (paragraph 315-316). It observed a need to improve staff training and development in the area of assessment and feedback, including training for external examiners. The assessment team highlighted that the faculty leadership had not done enough to make sure that standards for assessment and feedback were comparable on all courses. This meant that some students had received inadequate guidance to support their learning. This concern relates to condition of registration B4.2a which requires students to be assessed in a challenging and appropriately comprehensive way.

Annex A: Ongoing conditions of registration

Condition B1: Academic experience

Scope

B1.1 This condition applies to the quality of higher education provided in any manner or form by, or on behalf of, a Provider (including, but not limited to, circumstances where a Provider is responsible only for granting awards for students registered with another Provider).

Requirement

B1.2 Without prejudice to the principles and requirements provided for by any other condition of registration and the scope of B1.1, the Provider must ensure that the students registered on each higher education course receive a high quality academic experience.

B1.3 For the purposes of this condition, a high quality academic experience includes but is not limited to ensuring all of the following:

 a. each higher education course is up-to-date;

 b. each higher education course provides educational challenge;

 c. each higher education course is coherent;

 d. each higher education course is effectively delivered; and

 e. each higher education course, as appropriate to the subject matter of the course, requires students to develop relevant skills.

B1.4 Insofar as relevant skills includes technical proficiency in the English language, the Provider is not required to comply with B1.3.e to the extent that it is able to demonstrate to the OfS, on the balance of probabilities, that its English language proficiency requirements, or failure to have English language proficiency requirements, for one or more students, are strictly necessary as a matter of law because compliance with B1.3.e in respect of that student, or those students:

 i. would amount to a form of discrimination for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010; and

 ii. cannot be objectively justified for the purposes of relevant provisions of that Act; and

 iii. does not fall within an exception or exclusion provided for under or by virtue of that Act, including but not limited to provisions of the Act that relate to competence standards.

Definitions

B1.5 For the purposes of this condition B1:

 a. "**appropriately informed**" will be assessed by reference to:

 i. the time period within which any of the developments described in the definition of up-to-date have been in existence;

 ii. the importance of any of the developments described in the definition of up-to-date to the subject matter of the **higher education course**; and

 iii. the time period by which it is planned that such developments described in the

iv. definition of up-to-date will be brought into the higher education course content.

b. "**coherent**" means a higher education course which ensures:

i. there is an appropriate balance between breadth and depth of content;

ii. subjects and skills are taught in an appropriate order and, where necessary, build on each other throughout the course; and

iii. key concepts are introduced at the appropriate point in the course content.

c. "**educational challenge**" means a challenge that is no less than the minimum level of rigour and difficulty reasonably expected of the higher education course, in the context of the subject matter and level of the course.

d. "**effectively delivered**", in relation to a higher education course, means the manner in which it is taught, supervised and assessed (both in person and remotely) including, but not limited to, ensuring:

i. an appropriate balance between delivery methods, for example lectures, seminars,

ii. group work or practical study, as relevant to the content of the course; and

iii. an appropriate balance between directed and independent study or research, as

iv. relevant to the level of the course.

e. "**higher education course**" is to be interpreted:

i. in accordance with the Higher Education and Research Act 2017; and

ii. so as to include, for the avoidance of doubt:

A. course of study;

B. a programme of research;

C. any further education course that forms an integrated part of a higher education course; and

D. any module that forms part of a higher education course, whether or not that module is delivered as an integrated part of the course.

f. "**relevant skills**" means:

i. knowledge and understanding relevant to the subject matter and level of the higher education course; and

ii. other skills relevant to the subject matter and level of the higher education course including, but not limited to, cognitive skills, practical skills, transferable skills and professional competences.

g. "**up-to-date**" means representative of current thinking and practices in the subject matter to which the higher education course relates, including being appropriately informed by recent:

i. subject matter developments;

ii. research, industrial and professional developments; and

iii. developments in teaching and learning, including learning resources.

Condition B2: Resources, support and student engagement

Scope

B2.1 This condition applies to the quality of higher education provided in any manner or form by, or on behalf of, a Provider (including, but not limited to, circumstances where a Provider is responsible only for granting awards for students registered with another Provider).

Requirement

B2.2 Without prejudice to the principles and requirements provided for by any other condition of registration and the scope of B2.1, the Provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure:

    a. each **cohort of students** registered on each **higher education course** receives **resources** and **support** which are sufficient for the purpose of ensuring:

        i. a high quality academic experience for those students; and

        ii. those students succeed in and beyond higher education; and

    b. effective **engagement** with each **cohort of students** which is sufficient for the purpose of ensuring:

        i. a high quality academic experience for those students; and

        ii. those students succeed in and beyond higher education.

B2.3 For the purposes of this condition, "all reasonable steps" is to be interpreted in a manner which (without prejudice to other relevant considerations):

    a. focuses and places significant weight on:

        i. the particular academic needs of each **cohort of students** based on prior academic attainment and capability; and

        ii. the principle that the greater the academic needs of the **cohort of students**, the number and nature of the steps needed to be taken are likely to be more significant;

    b. places less weight, as compared to the factor described in B2.3a., on the Provider's financial constraints; and

    c. disregards case law relating to the interpretation of contractual obligations.

Definitions

B2.4 For the purposes of this condition B2:

    a. "**academic misconduct**" means any action or attempted action that may result in a student obtaining an unfair academic advantage in relation to an **assessment**, including but not limited to plagiarism, unauthorised collaboration and the possession of unauthorised materials during an **assessment**.

    b. "**appropriately qualified**" means staff have and maintain:

        i. expert knowledge of the subject they design and/or deliver;

ii. teaching qualifications or training, and teaching experience, appropriate for the content and level of the relevant **higher education course**; and

iii. the required knowledge and skills as to the effective delivery of their **higher education cour**se.

c. "**assessment**" means any component of a course used to assess student achievement towards a **relevant award**, including an examination and a test.

d. "**cohort of students**" means the group of students registered on to the **higher education cour**se in question and is to be interpreted by reference to the particular academic needs of those students based on prior academic attainment and capability.

e. "**engagement**" means routine provision of opportunities for students to contribute to the development of their academic experience and their **higher education course**, in a way that maintains the academic rigour of that course, including, but not limited to, through membership of the Provider's committees, opportunities to provide survey responses, and participation in activities to develop the course and the way it is delivered.

f. "**higher education course**" is to be interpreted:

i. in accordance with the Higher Education and Research Act 2017; and

ii. so as to include, for the avoidance of doubt:

A. a course of study;

B. a programme of research;

C. any further education course that forms an integrated part of a higher education course; and

D. any module that forms part of a higher education course, whether or not that module is delivered as an integrated part of the course.

g. "**physical and digital learning resources**" includes, as appropriate to the content and delivery of the **higher education course**, but is not limited to:

i. physical locations, for example teaching rooms, libraries, studios and laboratories;

ii. physical and digital learning resources, for example books, computers and software;

iii. the resources needed for digital learning and teaching, for example, hardware and software, and technical infrastructure; and

iv. other specialist resources, for example specialist equipment, software and research tools.

h. "**relevant award**" means:

i. a **research award**;

ii. a **taught award**; and/or

iii. any other type of award or qualification in respect of a **higher education course**, including an award of credit granted in respect of a module that may form part of a larger **higher education course**, whether or not granted pursuant to an authorisation

given by or under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, another Act of Parliament or Royal Charter.

i. "**research award**" and "taught award" have the meanings given in section 42(3) of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

j. "**resources**" includes but is not limited to:

   i. the staff team that designs and delivers a **higher education course** being collectively **sufficient in number**, **appropriately qualified** and deployed effectively to deliver in practice; and

   ii. **physical and digital learning resources** that are adequate and deployed effectively to meet the needs of the **cohort of students**.

k. "**sufficient in number**" will be assessed by reference to the principle that the larger the cohort size of students, the greater the number of staff and amount of staff time should be available to students, and means, in the context of the staff team:

   i. there is sufficient financial resource to recruit and retain sufficient staff;

   ii. the Provider allocates appropriate financial resource to ensuring staff are equipped to teach courses;

   iii. **higher education courses** have an adequate number of staff, and amount of staff time; and

   iv. the impact on students of changes in staffing is minimal.

l. "**support**" means the effective deployment of assistance, as appropriate to the content of the **higher education course** and the **cohort of students**, including but not limited to:

   i. academic support relating to the content of the higher education course;

   ii. support needed to underpin successful physical and digital learning and teaching;

   iii. support relating to understanding, avoiding and reporting **academic misconduct**; and

   iv. careers support, but for the avoidance of doubt, does not include other categories of non-academic support.

Condition B4: Assessment and awards

Scope

B4.1 This condition applies to the quality of higher education provided in any manner or form by, or on behalf of, a Provider (including, but not limited to, circumstances where a Provider is responsible only for granting awards for students registered with another Provider).

Requirement

B4.2 Without prejudice to the principles and requirements provided for by any other condition of registration and the scope of B4.1, the Provider must ensure that:

a. students are **assessed effectively**;

b. each **assessment** is **valid** and **reliable**;

c. **academic regulations** are designed to ensure that **relevant awards** are **credible**;

d. subject to paragraph B4.3, in respect of each **higher education course**, **academic regulations** are designed to ensure the effective assessment of technical proficiency in the English language in a manner which appropriately reflects the level and content of the applicable **higher education course**; and

e. **relevant awards** granted to students are **credible** at the point of being granted and when compared to those granted previously.

B4.3 The Provider is not required to comply with B4.2d to the extent that:

a. a **higher education course** is assessing a language that is not English; or

b. the Provider is able to demonstrate to the OfS, on the balance of probabilities, that its **academic regulations**, or failure to have any **academic regulations**, for assessing technical proficiency in the English language for one or more students are strictly necessary as a matter of law because compliance with B4.2d in respect of that student, or those students:

 i. would amount to a form of discrimination for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010; and

 ii. cannot be objectively justified for the purposes of relevant provisions of that Act; and

 iii. does not fall within an exception or exclusion provided for under or by virtue of that Act, including but not limited to provisions of the Act that relate to competence standards.

Definitions

B4.4 For the purposes of this condition B4:

a. "**academic misconduct**" means any action or attempted action that may result in a student obtaining an unfair academic advantage in relation to an **assessment**, including but not limited to plagiarism, unauthorised collaboration and the possession of unauthorised materials during an **assessment**.

b. "**academic regulations**" means regulations adopted by the Provider, which govern its **higher education courses**, including but not limited to:

 i. the assessment of students' work;

 ii. student discipline relating to academic matters;

 iii. the requirements for **relevant awards**; and

 iv. the method used to determine classifications, including but not limited to:

 A. the requirements for an award; and

 B. the algorithms used to calculate the classification of awards.

c. "**assessed effectively**" means assessed in a challenging and appropriately comprehensive way, by reference to the subject matter of the **higher education course**, and includes but is not limited to:

 i. providing stretch and rigour consistent with the level of the course;

 ii. testing **relevant skills**; and

iii. **assessments** being designed in a way that minimises the opportunities for **academic misconduc**t and facilitates the detection of such misconduct where it does occur.

d. "**assessment**" means any component of a course used to assess student achievement towards a **relevant award**, including an examination and a test.

e. "**credible**" means that, in the reasonable opinion of the OfS, **relevant awards** reflect students' knowledge and skills, and for this purpose the OfS may take into account factors which include, but are not limited to:

　　i. the number of relevant awards granted, and the classifications attached to them, and the way in which this number and/or the classifications change over time and compare with other Providers;

　　ii. whether students are **assessed effectively** and whether **assessments** are **valid** and **reliable**;

　　iii. any actions the Provider has taken that would result in an increased number of **relevant awar**ds, and/or changes in the classifications attached to them, whether or not the achievement of students has increased, for example, changes to assessment practices or **academic regulations**; and

　　iv. the Provider's explanation and evidence in support of the reasons for any changes in the classifications over time or differences with other Providers.

f. "**higher education course**" is to be interpreted:

　　i. in accordance with the Higher Education and Research Act 2017; and

　　ii. so as to include, for the avoidance of doubt:

　　　　A. a course of study;

　　　　B. a programme of research;

　　　　C. any further education course that forms an integrated part of a higher education course; and

　　　　D. any module that forms part of a higher education course, whether or not that module is delivered as an integrated part of the course.

g. "**relevant award**" means:

　　i. a **research award**;

　　ii. a **taught award**; and/or

　　iii. any other type of award or qualification in respect of a **higher education course**, including an award of credit granted in respect of a module that may form part of a larger **higher education course**, whether or not granted pursuant to an authorisation given by or under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, another Act of Parliament or Royal Charter.

h. "**relevant skills**" means:

　　i. knowledge and understanding relevant to the subject matter and level of the **higher education cou**rse; and

    ii. other skills relevant to the subject matter and level of the **higher education course** including, but not limited to, cognitive skills, practical skills, transferable skills and professional competences.

i.   "**reliable**" means that an **assessment**, in practice, requires students to demonstrate knowledge and skills in a manner which is consistent as between the students registered on a **higher education course** and over time, as appropriate in the context of developments in the content and delivery of the **higher education course**.

j.   "**research award**" and "**taught award**" have the meanings given in section 42(3) of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

k. "**valid**" means that an **assessment** in fact takes place in a way that results in students demonstrating knowledge and skills in the way intended by design of the assessment.