

# LSE100 PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT PILOT STUDY

*This report presents findings of LSE100's e-portfolio approach  
for summative assessment  
2014-2015*

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## Executive Summary

This study provides a preliminary overview of the impetus and outcomes of the LSE100 change in assessment structure. While initially evaluating student performance based on a heavily weighted final exam, LSE100 now consists of an e-portfolio assessment method that is structured to support and incentivize ongoing student learning.

Based on the feedback of LSE100 teachers and administrative staff, the findings affirm the pedagogical merit of e-portfolios in driving student learning and performance. Overall, teachers suggest there are visible differences in the clarity, cohesiveness, and depth of student work when under an e-portfolio versus exam method of assessment. However, the findings highlight a number of areas for future consideration. Given LSE100 is unique in its size (with upwards of 1500 students registered at any given time), a number of process changes with regards to marking are required. Striking a balance between creativity on the part of teachers while ensuring consistency across cohorts is for example, a challenge with a course of this nature. From a technical perspective, the course evaluation has highlighted the necessity to invest in portfolio specific software (as an ideal alternative) or significantly adapt existing systems to accommodate multiple teachers and a much larger volume of student work being submitted at any given time.

Overall however, the success of the LSE100 change in assessment structure is clear; it is no longer an assessment for the sake of an assessment but rather, an assessment structured to support and drive student learning.

## Summary

LSE 100 is a mandatory first-year interdisciplinary course that runs in the Lent term in the first year and Michaelmas term in the second year. It consists of a lecture delivered once a week, followed by smaller class sessions. One-to-one feedback sessions and the LSE100 Writing Lab<sup>1</sup> are additional components of LSE100.

When first introduced, the course consisted of 6, 3-week modules and was primarily assessed via a heavily weighted final exam. In the 2015 Lent term, this changed to include 4, 5-week modules and a portfolio assessment method. Going forward into the 2015 Michaelmas term, the course will move from 2 in-class written assessments and a 1,500 word essay to 2 take-home short written assignments and 2 pieces of group work. The details of these assessment structures are found below:

## LSE100 outline and assessment

### Lent term of the first year

S1<sup>2</sup> Short take-home writing piece approx. 800 - 1000 words (20%) – Week 5

S2 Group project/presentation (20%) – Week 10/11

S3 Portfolio (10%) – must be passed to complete the course – Week 11

### Michaelmas term of the second year

S4 Short take-home writing piece approx. 800 words (20%) – Week 5

S5 Group project/presentation (20%) – Week 10/11

S6 Portfolio (10%) – must be passed to complete the course – Week 11

### Grade requirements

In order to successfully fulfill the LSE100 requirements, students must attempt all 6 summative assessments and obtain a pass mark for both portfolio assessments.

Each piece of work is awarded a numerical mark. For example, in the S1 in-class essay, students will be awarded a mark out of 20, as the assessment is worth 20% of the overall mark.

The final grade for the course is listed at the top of transcripts, and is calculated as the total of the marks received for the summative assessments and awarded as follows:

### Grading

Distinction 70-100

Merit 60-69

Pass 40-59

Fail 39 or below

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<sup>1</sup> A one-to-one 30 minute tutorial service to support students' academic written work

<sup>2</sup> 'S' indicates Summative assessment

## Background

The broad aim of this report is to provide a preliminary assessment of the LSE100 portfolio-based assessment and to provide recommendations for managing the new assessment process.

The impetus for shifting the LSE100 assessment structure was two-fold:

1. Recognition that the exam was not the best possible means of assessing student learning and performance, particularly as it required that students reflect on work from a year prior.<sup>3</sup> Relatedly, having an exam subsequent to the Christmas break conflicted with travel schedules while further constituting a source of anxiety during the intended 'break.'
2. The large administrative burden placed on teachers given the large volume of students enrolled in the course at any given time (approximately 1500 per cohort).

The changes made to the LSE100 assessment structure were largely inspired by North American alternative methods that emphasized continuous learning and student engagement above a final examination. Teaching staff involved with LSE100 for example, noticed diligent students did not always perform well during the final exam while other relatively less active students received high marks. Teachers further noticed the quality of responses on final exams was not of the caliber seen on essays completed during the year. As such, teaching staff felt the assessment was not structured *for* learning<sup>4</sup> but rather, an assessment for assessment's sake that did not serve as a meaningful representation of student learning and performance.

## Process

LSE100 teaching and administrative staff held meetings with LTI and other academic support teams to discuss alternative methods for summative assessment. The pedagogical benefits of a change in assessment structure were well explored in the lead up to the shift to portfolio assessments.

## Evaluation Methodology

Three focus group sessions of approximately 45 minutes each were hosted at the LTI office. Of the 40 staff involved with the program, 6 were invited to share their views and experiences, based on the recommendation of the LSE100 Deputy Director. Of the 6 informants, 3 were teachers and 2 were fellows.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The exam was carried out in Week 0 of the Lent term while the course ran through the Michaelmas term preceding.

<sup>4</sup> Earl, Lorna, and Steven Katz. "Rethinking classroom assessment with purpose in mind." Winnipeg, Manitoba: Western Northern Canadian Protocol (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Fellows hold a more senior standing compared to teachers as they are involved in the course development and mentor and train the teachers.

## Limitations

No student data was collected although staff were asked to convey student views to the best of their knowledge.

Part 1 of this report focuses on findings from staff on the pedagogical benefits of portfolio assessments, Part 2 discusses the important requirements in moving forward, and Part 3 presents a summary of the concluding remarks.

## Part 1: Findings

### 1.1 Portfolio Assessments: Purpose & Educational Outcomes

A primary aim of the portfolio assessment was to incentivize ongoing preparation for class and active participation throughout. By providing portfolio questions to accompany weekly readings, teachers worked to support students in completing a critical reading of the required material. Given the interdisciplinary environment of LSE100, reading questions released prior to class were seen as an effective means of providing all students an opportunity to prepare and contribute to class discussions.

In addition to preparing for the weekly questions, students were expected to complete self-reflection pieces at the end of each term. These reflections were intended to provide students an opportunity to review the year in a holistic manner while integrating their own views and experiences into the content covered. While the weekly responses could have easily been copied and done in a mechanical manner, the reflection component was intended to encourage a more personalized and self-directed learning process.

*“Many of the things which may be obvious to teachers are less obvious concepts to students but the students are able to make connections; the last week is a self-reflection so they look back and view it all as a holistic learning experience.”*

As a means of further stimulating more sincere engagement with the material, students were given an opportunity to revise the weekly submissions prior to formally submitting content for grading. Teachers noted that many students did in fact review previously submitted material while seeking the advice of their teachers to build on responses. As such, the logic of exams – whereby content is revised at the end of the year – was evidently extended to the portfolio method albeit via a different method.

Interviewees noted:

*“Students make links versus being strategic and learning aspects of modules.”*

*“The portfolio enables students to digest information more effectively”*

While no specific figures were tabulated, teachers commented on the high rate of portfolio submissions and the relatively high standard to which these submissions were completed.

### 1.2 Feedback and Marking

The term portfolio submission was carried out via an assignment on Moodle. Students were told to update and add to the same word document each week and resubmit it to Moodle. While some teachers requested that students bring their answers to class in hard copy so that they could incorporate the content into class discussion, there was inconsistency across teachers in terms of what they asked of students in this regard. At the end of term, students were asked to submit their final word document to a different assignment on Moodle. Although the course team tried to make the instructions for submission as clear as possible, many students were confused about the submission process. Some teachers were also unclear about how to advise students perhaps as they were not familiar with portfolio based assessment.

Teachers were supposed to review portfolio submissions each week and give feedback to their students in class – either as a group or individually. However this proved to be unmanageable, partly as the large number of submissions caused long delays to download and view the documents on Moodle and partly due to teachers' workload. Teachers have an average of 4 classes which would mean approximately 50 submissions per week. Teachers were also required to hold face to face feedback sessions with each student during the term to give feedback on student essay plans.

While teachers had favorable views of the shift in assessment and noted a more constructive alignment between learning goals and assessments<sup>6</sup>, the student feedback derived from SSLC and TQARO in relation to "feedback" was relatively poor. One teacher felt the latter was partially due to the fact that student's view feedback in a relatively narrow way. Thus, one-to-one essay planning carried out during office hours was not for example, considered 'feedback'. It may also be due to time it took to return feedback. Due to the double marking process it took six weeks to return the essay that students wrote in Week 5, which meant they didn't get a mark or feedback until after term had ended. It is important to note however, that most of the feedback derived from the surveys was not directly in relation to portfolio assessments and/or content.

Moreover, teachers recognized that while some students preferred portfolio assessments, others tend to opt for exams<sup>7</sup>. While a diversity of student preferences in relation to assessment are likely to exist, teachers felt the benefits of the portfolio in driving student engagement in class were preferred. Moreover, the portfolio method further served as a means to systematically assess class participation and thus ensure a degree of standardization across the 1500 students being marked by various teachers. Relatedly, teachers emphasized the importance of referring back to portfolio questions during class time to validate the time spent on formulating responses.

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<sup>6</sup> Biggs, J. (1999) Teaching for Quality Learning at University – What the Student Does (1st Edition) SRHE / Open University Press, Buckingham.

<sup>7</sup> Insert ref – student perception on assessment (i.e. exam =grade bearing nothing else)



With respect to marking, the portfolio format with weekly tasks allowed teachers to view multiple submissions from one student. The teacher is therefore, better equipped to get a sense of the student's style and mark the essence of what the student aims to convey. Nevertheless, teachers commented on the relatively high administrative burden posed by the necessity to double-mark student work. One teacher suggested double-marking a randomized sample instead so as to save on time but verify consistency in marking across teachers. It has now been agreed to move to single moderated marking which should allow feedback to be returned to students within three weeks of submission. Teachers will be asked to use the time saved on marking to provide detailed feedback and students should be able to refer to the work they submitted when reviewing their feedback.

### 1.3 The platform

At present, LSE does not have any software available for portfolio submissions. A few teachers described the current set-up on Moodle to be a bit "clunky," primarily in terms of uploading documents one at a time. The Moodle assignment feature on Moodle is also not the most appropriate tool for processing large submissions of regular portfolio documents, which may have explained part of the confusion with submission methods highlighted by teachers in Section 1.2. Despite the latter, teachers consistently emphasized these to be small issues typical of new initiatives and methods:

*"Academically, it's been a success. What needs to be worked out is the process."*

The large scale of LSE100 combined with the complex marking procedures that currently take place require a very specific workflow that may not be possible to replicate using a non-bespoke programme. However the simplification of assessment procedures going forward (including the move to single moderated marking) may allow for a scaled back marking workflow which could be replicated on a smaller scale.

## Part 2: Moving forward

In moving forward with e-portfolio assessments, LSE100 is principally concerned with making improvements in the following areas:

- **Marking Processes:** Developing more efficient marking processes is of particular concern to teachers, given LSE100 has upward of 1500 students enrolled in the course. In relation to the portfolio itself, teachers explored the idea of varying portfolio exercises as a means to emphasize that social science is beyond reading articles. While expressing a desire for flexibility to adapt content and methods, teachers recognized the need for consistency. To this end, coordinating across teachers and ensuring consistent communications to students were factors seen to be of principal concern in running such a course.
- **Platform Adjustments:** LSE100 has complex requirements with regards to submission and marking processes as well as varied requirements in the ways submitted assessments are viewed. LTI is working with LSE100 to identify a viable technical

platform that eases workload issues to a significant degree. A separate report produced by LTI discusses the various options for platforms and processes to accommodate LSE100 e-portfolio tasks.

- **Exploring mixed methods:** Given the large emphasis on interaction and discussion that LSE100 involves, it is worth considering a mixture of methods to enable more sincere and meaningful engagement from students. Flip lectures – an inverted approach to learning whereby a lecturer prepares and presents learning material to students prior to classroom sessions – may be an interesting approach in this context and a teaching method that may complement the portfolio assessment structure. This learning format is intended to enable a prioritization of discussion and activity-based learning during in-class time when the teacher and students are physically together but places a large onus on students to prepare well prior to class.

### **Part 3: Concluding remarks**

Although a perfect solution is not available, it is possible to improve current processes using existing school platforms. Another review of the portfolio assessment subsequent to any process improvements would then need to be carried out to ensure the desired improvements are realized. It would further be of value to solicit student views throughout the processes.