# Staff guide to sub-element units of assessment at Nottingham Trent University

This document provides guidance for staff at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) on the use of sub-element units of assessment. The first part provides a definition of sub-elements. The second part provides guidance on the grading of sub-elements. Finally, the guide outlines the considerations which should be given to the approval and quality management of sub-elements.

## Part one: Guidance on sub-elements

### *1.1 What are sub-elements and when might they be used?*

At NTU, achievement of a module's learning outcomes is summatively assessed by an assessment element or elements. A student has to achieve at least a pass grade in each element in order to demonstrate the learning outcomes and thus pass the module. In some circumstances, an element may be comprised of smaller units of assessment or **sub-elements**. A defining characteristic of a sub-element of assessment is that it does not necessarily need to be passed in order for the element to which its grade contributes to be passed. If a course team deems that a specific assessment task is necessary to be passed because it assesses essential learning outcomes then it cannot be defined as a sub-element.

There are several ways in which sub-elements contribute to overall element grades (see part two below).

Within the NTU assessment framework, sub-elements are only used on an exceptional basis in order that we ensure that students are not over-assessed during their course of study. When sub-elements are deemed necessary, this is typically because one or more of the module learning outcomes cannot be adequately tested by a single assessment task.

Sub-elements should not be used for the sole purpose of providing an indication of achievement to the student or course team; this should be done through formative assessment tasks.

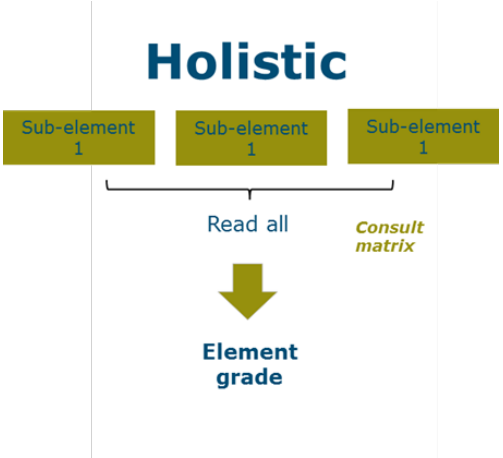
Sub-elements should not be used solely to assess an essential module learning outcome because all essential module learning outcomes must be summatively assessed and achieved in order for a module to be passed (see Quality Handbook Supplement 12A for further guidance on module learning outcomes).

## Part two: Approaches to aggregation of sub-elements to achieve an element grade

There are several different ways in which sub-element grades are aggregated to achieve the element grade. The aggregation method is determined when the module assessment is approved and is based upon the particular characteristics of the assessment tasks involved. Certain approaches are better suited than others to particular types of assessment.

### *2.1 Holistic approach*

The holistic approach describes those situations in which the element grade is based on an *overall* assessment of students' performance in relation to the essential module learning outcomes, based on the student's achievement across a range of sub-elements.




The grading matrix shows the relationship between the criteria being assessed and the module learning outcomes. Student work is referenced against this to assign an overall grade.

An advantage of this approach is that the element grade is assigned based on the overall performance demonstrated across the different sub-elements; strength in one area can compensate for weakness in another area.

The disadvantage of this approach is that students may feel that it would be useful to see individual grades for the individual assessment pieces (sub-elements). Providing this transparency to students and other examiners is more challenging using this

approach than using alternative approaches, particularly where student performance is highly variable in each part.

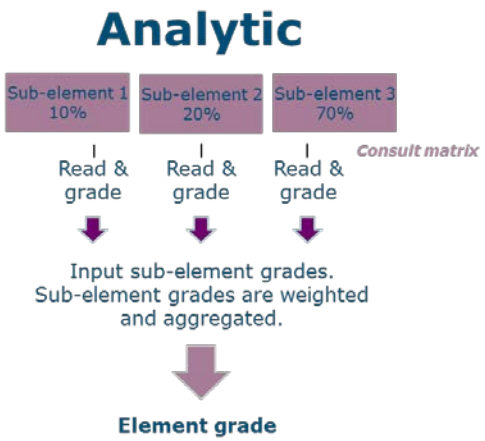
### *2.2 Analytic approach*

The marker assigns a separate grade to each sub-element assessment piece.

These separate sub-element grades are input into Banner which then calculates the overall element grade according to the pre-approved weightings of each sub-element.

The grading matrix shows the relationship between the criteria being assessed and the module learning outcomes.

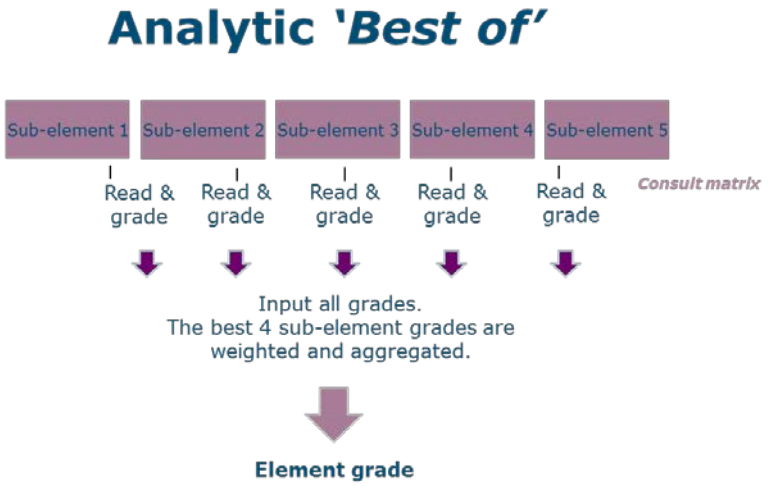
The main advantage of this approach is the transparency which can be achieved across grading of individual assessment pieces (sub-elements). Care should be taken, however, that the final element grade appropriately reflects performance against the module learning outcomes – especially where different sub-elements are assessing aspects of the same module learning outcome. Careful assessment design is particularly important in these circumstances.




### *2.3 'Best of' approach*

A variation of the analytical approach is where the final element grade is based on a selection of the best grades from a set of sub-element grades. An example would be a portfolio which comprises five lab reports, where only the best four sub-element grades actually contribute to the final element grade. In these cases all sub-elements must be weighted equally.

The advantage of this approach is that students are not penalised by a really poor assessment piece – and hence it may encourage students to be more adventurous in their approach to their assessments without the threat of failure. It also gives students some flexibility when it comes to deciding how to focus their efforts.

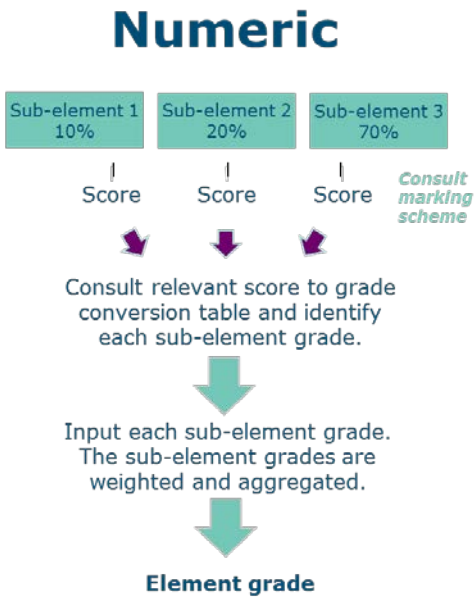



### *2.4 Numeric approach*

There may be some assessments where it is necessary to use a numeric approach to the initial stages of grading student work, such as for multiple choice assessments and for assessments that require students to write short answers or answers that are either right/wrong or true/false.

With this approach, sub-elements are numerically marked (to derive a 'raw score') and a grade is assigned by reference to a raw score-grade conversion process.

This approach is absolutely the same as the approach that must be used at element or module level when a grade associated with a piece of assessment has been arrived at via a conversion from a quantitative mark. As with the analytic approach, these grades are then input into Banner



which then calculates the overall element grade according to the pre-approved weightings of each sub-element.

### *2.5 Mixed economy*

There may be some cases where an element is made up of a combination of sub-elements some of which are marked numerically and others which are not. In these cases, Banner will calculate the overall element grade according to the pre-agreed constraints.

## Part three: Quality management of sub-elements

### *3.1 Approval of the use of sub-elements*

Whatever the approach used to aggregate sub-element grades, it is crucial that the grading and aggregation process is transparent, consistent and is rigorously moderated. Remember, however, **sub-elements are only used in exceptional circumstances**.

The decision about whether a module warrants assessment by sub-elements must be carefully thought through by the course team and approved by the School Academic Standards and Quality Committee (SASQC). Consideration must be given to whether the decision to use sub-elements leads to an overly high assessment load for students and whether it compromises the opportunities for formative assessment.

Specifically, the SASQC will expect to see:

- **A strong rationale.** Where course teams are proposing to use sub-elements of assessment, a strong rationale must be provided. This rationale should be reviewed by course teams regularly. Sub-elements should not lead to the overassessment of students nor act as a replacement for formative assessment.
- **Articulation of the method by which sub-element grades will be aggregated to the element grade.** The relative contribution of a sub-element of assessment to an overall element grade must be made clear. The aggregation approach (see above) must also be agreed as part of this approval.

The arrangements for assessment of sub-elements must be clearly articulated for all stakeholders, and available for scrutiny, for example at pre-assessment moderation meetings and/or at course committees. Details of sub-elements must be articulated in module specifications.

### *3.2 Moderation of sub-elements*

Moderation of sub-elements of assessment (in terms of both the task and the grades) is subject to the same requirements as for elements of assessment (see the NTU Quality Handbook).

### *3.3 Assessment feedback*

Feedback on performance on sub-element assessment pieces follows the same principles as for assessment feedback more generally. In some instances separate grading matrices will be used for individual sub-elements, in other cases one grading matrix will be used for the element as a whole.

Individual sub-element grades are not recorded on the student HEAR report.