
RET 101 – Retirement Plan Design

Nov 2026/Mar 2027/Jul 2027

Important Course Information:

Exam Registration	Candidates may register online or with an application.
Order Study Notes	Study notes are part of the required syllabus and are not available electronically but may be purchased through the online store.
Syllabus Resources	Resources listed in this syllabus may include study notes, online readings, textbooks, videos and module content. Candidates are responsible for all materials in their entirety, including sections such as Appendices, unless it is stated otherwise in the syllabus.
Topic Weight Ranges	The weight ranges show the relative emphasis on each topic. They are intended to apply broadly over multiple sittings; however, on any individual exam these could fall outside the published range. Some questions will cover multiple learning objectives.
Learning Outcomes	Each resource lists the primary learning outcome(s) it aligns with under that topic. Resources are listed in the recommended order of study to best master the overall topic. Additional guidance is provided in the Course Strategy Guide.
Introductory Study Note	The Introductory Study Note has a complete listing of all study notes as well as errata and other important information.
Case Study	A case study will not be provided for this examination.
Past Exams	Past Exams are available on the SOA website.
Updates	Candidates should be sure to check for updates on the course homepage periodically for additional corrections or notices to the current syllabus.

1. Topic: Benefit Plan Structure, Features and Investments (30%-50%)

Learning Objectives

The candidate will understand how to analyze different types of designs for retirement plans and retirement plan investments.

Learning Outcomes

The Candidate will be able to:

- a) Describe the structure of the following plans:
 - Traditional defined benefit plans
 - Defined contribution and savings plans
 - Hybrid plans
 - Other alternative retirement plans such as executive retirement plans, shared risk plans, target benefit plans, etc.
- b) Given a plan type, explain the relevance and range of plan features including the following:
 - Plan eligibility requirements
 - Benefit eligibility requirements, accrual, vesting
 - Benefit / contribution formula, including methods of integration with benefits provided by social insurance
 - Payment options and associated adjustments to the amount of benefit
 - Ancillary benefits
 - Benefit subsidies and their value, vested or non-vested
 - Participant investment options
 - Required and optional employee contributions
 - Early and late retirement options
 - Indexing
- c) Discuss investment of retirement plan assets
 - Assess the different types and combinations of investment vehicles typically used for providing retirement benefits.
 - Distinguish the various strategies, approaches and techniques used to manage retirement fund assets

Resources	Learning Outcomes
<p><i>Retirement Plans - 401(k)s, IRAs and Other Deferred Compensation Approaches</i>, Allen et al., 12th Edition, 2018 (details of the U.S. regulatory environment will not be tested)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ch. 2: Strategic Plan Design 	1a, 1b, 1c
<p><i>Fundamentals of Private Pensions</i>, McGill et al., 9th Edition, 2010</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ch. 5: Human-Resource Incentives (excluding pp. 154-156) 	1a, 1b, 1c
<p><i>Morneau Shepell, Handbook of Canadian Pension and Benefit Plans</i>, 17th Edition, 2020 (details of the Canadian regulatory environment will not be tested)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ch. 1: Overview of Retirement Income Arrangements 	1a, 1b, 1c
<p>RET101-110-25: Social Security Programs Throughout the World: Europe, 2018</p>	1b
<p><i>Retirement Plans - 401(k)s, IRAs and Other Deferred Compensation Approaches</i>, Allen et al., 12th Edition, 2018 (details of the U.S. regulatory environment will not be tested)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ch. 3: Defined Contribution versus Defined Benefit Plans (pp. 50-54) Ch. 17: Defined Benefit Plan Features Ch. 8: Cash or Deferred Arrangements (CODAs) under Section 401(k) (pp. 125-128) Ch. 11: Behavioral Finance Impacts on Defined Contribution Plan Designs (excluding pp. 198-200) Ch. 14: Executive Retirement Arrangements (pp. 250-263) Ch. 21: Cash Balance and Other Hybrid Retirement Plans Ch. 29: Facilitating Investment of Defined Contribution Plan Assets (pp. 555-561) 	<p>1a</p> <p>1a, 1b</p> <p>1a, 1b</p> <p>1a, 1b, 1c</p> <p>1a, 1b</p> <p>1a, 1b</p> <p>1a, 1c</p>
<p><i>Fundamentals of Private Pensions</i>, McGill et al., 9th Edition, 2010</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ch. 10: Defined Benefit Design Ch. 28: Investing and Defined Contribution Plans 	<p>1a, 1b</p> <p>1a, 1c</p>
<p><i>Morneau Shepell, Handbook of Canadian Pension and Benefit Plans</i>, 17th Edition, 2020 (details of the Canadian regulatory environment will not be tested)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ch. 3: Employer Pension Plans: Terms and Conditions Ch. 7: Pension Fund Investment Management 	<p>1a, 1b</p> <p>1c</p>
<p>RET101-102-25: Defined Contribution Plan Success Factors</p>	1a, 1b
<p>RET101-100-25: Framework for Future Defined Contribution Design</p>	1a, 1b
<p>RET101-123-26: CAPSA Guideline No. 3: Guidelines for Capital Accumulation Plans</p>	1a, 1b
<p>RET101-109-25: Designing the Future of Target-Date Funds</p>	1a, 1c

RET101-124-26: The Future of DC Plans: Key Trends for 2025 and Beyond	<i>1a, 1c</i>
The Next Evolution in Defined Contribution Retirement Plan Design: A Guide for DC Plan Sponsors to Implementing Retirement Income Programs , SOA, Sep 2013 (pp. 61-88 background only)	<i>1a, 1b</i>
RET101-104-25: The Hybrid Handbook: Not All Hybrids are Created Equal	<i>1a, 1b</i>
RET101-106-25: Multi-Employer Plans	<i>1a, 1b</i>
RET101-107-26: Introduction and Overview of Retirement Plan Investments	<i>1c</i>
RET101-108-25: CAPSA, Guideline No. 6, Pension Plan Prudent Investment Practices Guideline	<i>1c</i>
Report of the Task Force on Target Benefit Plans , CIA, Jun 2015, (excluding sections 4, 5, & Appendices)	<i>1a, 1b</i>
Analysis of Target Benefit Plan Design Options , SOA, Feb 2016, pp. 12-16	<i>1a</i>
RET101-101-25: Integration with Social Security	<i>1b</i>
RET101-103-25: Phased Retirement: An Important Part of the Evolving Retirement Scene	<i>1b</i>

2. Topic: Participant Risks (15%-25%)

Learning Objectives

The candidate will understand how to analyze the risks faced by retirees and the participants of retirement plans.

Learning Outcomes

The Candidate will be able to:

- a) Identify risks faced by retirees and the elderly
- b) Describe and contrast the risks faced by participants of various sponsored plans, such as:
 - Retirement plans sponsored by public sector employers
 - Single employer sponsored retirement plans
 - Retirement plans involving more than one employer, and
 - Social insurance plans
- c) Evaluate benefit adequacy and measure replacement income for members of a particular plan given other sources of retirement income
- d) Describe ways in which retirement plan design can manage the range of risks faced by plan participants and retirees

Resources	Learning Outcomes
<p><i>Fundamentals of Private Pensions</i>, McGill et al., 9th Edition, 2010</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ch. 5: Human-Resource Incentives (excluding pp. 154-156) • Ch. 9: Risks of Outliving Resources (pp. 270-289 only) 	<p>2b</p> <p>2a, 2d</p>
<p>Managing Post-Retirement Risks: Strategies for a Secure Retirement, SOA, 2025</p>	2a
<p>RET101-114-25: How Accurately does 70% Final Employment Earnings Replacement Measure Retirement Income (In)Adequacy? Introducing the Living Standards Replacement Rate (LSRR): (sections 3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 4 & 5 and Appendices background only)</p>	2c
<p>RET101-110-25: Social Security Programs Throughout the World: Europe, 2018</p>	2b
<p><i>Retirement Plans - 401(k)s, IRAs and Other Deferred Compensation Approaches</i>, Allen et al., 12th Edition, 2018</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ch. 17: Defined Benefit Plan Features • Ch. 11: Behavioral Finance Impacts on Defined Contribution Plan Designs (excluding 198-200) 	<p>2b, 2d</p> <p>2a, 2d</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ch. 21: Cash Balance and Other Hybrid Retirement Plans • Ch. 14: Executive Retirement Arrangements (pp. 250-263) 	<p>2d</p> <p>2d</p>
<p>The Next Evolution in Defined Contribution Retirement Plan Design: A Guide for DC Plan Sponsors to Implementing Retirement Income Programs, SOA, Sep 2013 (pp. 61-88 background only)</p>	<p>2a, 2d</p>
<p>RET101-111-25: Risk Management and Public Plan Retirement Systems - Appendices B and C only (remainder is background)</p>	<p>2b</p>
<p>Primer on Retirement Income Strategy Design and Evaluation, SOA Research, Jan 2023, Executive Summary, Sections 1, 2, 5, 6 & Appendix A</p>	<p>2a, 2d</p>
<p>RET101-112-25: Private Pensions: Alternative Approaches Could Address Retirement Risks Faced by Workers but Pose Tradeoffs, pp.1-35</p>	<p>2a, 2d</p>
<p>RET101-113-25: The Promise of Defined Ambition Plans: Lessons for the United States</p>	<p>2d</p>
<p>RET101-115-25: An Improved Application of the Variable Annuity</p>	<p>2d</p>
<p>RET101-116-25: The Case for Collective DC (sections 1-7 only)</p>	<p>2d</p>
<p>Report of the Task Force on Target Benefit Plans, CIA, Jun 2015 (excluding sections 4, 5 & Appendices)</p>	<p>2d</p>
<p>Educational Note: Financial Risks Inherent in Multi-Employer Pension Plans and Target Benefit Pension Plans, CIA, May 2011</p>	<p>2b</p>

3. Topic: Sponsor Risks (15%-25%)

Learning Objectives

The candidate will understand how to analyze the risks faced by sponsors of retirement plans.

Learning Outcomes

The Candidate will be able to:

- a) Identify how plan features, temporary or permanent, can adversely affect the plan sponsor
- b) Assess the sponsor risk from options offered, including:
 - Postponed retirement
 - Early retirement
 - Optional forms of payment factors
 - Embedded options
 - Portability options
 - Investment options
 - Decumulation features
- c) Describe ways to mitigate the risks identified with a particular plan feature

Resources	Learning Outcomes
RET101-104-25: The Hybrid Handbook: Not All Hybrids are Created Equal	3a, 3b, 3c
Report of the Task Force on Target Benefit Plans , CIA, Jun 2015 (excluding sections 4, 5 & Appendices)	3a, 3b, 3c
The Next Evolution in Defined Contribution Retirement Plan Design: A Guide for DC Plan Sponsors to Implementing Retirement Income Programs , SOA, Sep 2013 (pp. 61-88 background only)	3b
RET101-111-25: Risk Management and Public Plan Retirement Systems - Appendices A-C only (remainder is background)	3a
Pension Risk Transfer: Evaluating Impact and Barriers for De-Risking Strategies , SOA, Jun 2021 (pp. 8-19 only)	3c
Primer on Retirement Income Strategy Design and Evaluation , SOA Research, Jan 2023, Executive Summary, Sections 1, 2, 5, 6 & Appendix A	3b
RET101-117-25: Implementing Early Retirement Incentive Programs: A Step-by-Step Guide	3b

RET101-118-25: Pension Issues in Mergers and Acquisitions	3a
Embedded Options in Pension Plans: Catalogue of Embedded Options Survey of Prevalence of Embedded Options , SOA, Aug 2011, pp. 1-17	3b

4. Topic: Benefit Plan Design Recommendation (15%-25%)

Learning Objectives

The candidate will understand how to evaluate sponsors' goals for the retirement plan, evaluate alternative plan types and features, and recommend a plan design appropriate to address those goals.

Learning Outcomes

The Candidate will be able to:

- a) Describe ways to identify and prioritize the sponsor's goals related to the design of the retirement plan
- b) Assess the tradeoffs between different goals
- c) Assess the feasibility of achieving the sponsor's goals for their retirement plan
- d) State relationships or recognize contradictions between a sponsor's plan design goals and retirement risks faced by retirees
- e) State relationship or recognize contradictions between sponsor's goals and taxpayers' perspective when evaluating benefit plan design
- f) Identify the ways that regulation impacts the sponsor's plan design goals
- g) Design retirement programs that manage retirement risk, are consistent with sponsor's objectives and promote employee behavior consistent with sponsor's objectives.
- h) Evaluate the pros and cons from both a sponsor and employee perspective of introducing options that impact the labor force demographics
- i) Recommend a method to integrate benefits provided by social insurance with retirement plan designs in order to meet the plan sponsor's particular goals and defend the recommendation
- j) Recommend an appropriate plan type and plan design features for providing retirement benefits and defend the recommendations
- k) Assess the potential effects, including tax implications, of various investments and investment policies on all of the stakeholders
- l) Identify and assess the sources of investment risk applicable to retirement fund assets
- m) Explain and apply restrictions on plan design features to a proposed plan design, taking into accounting the use of tax incentives and understanding conflicts between regulations and design objectives
- n) Identify changes that could reduce sponsor risk.

Resources

Retirement Plans - 401(k)s, IRAs and Other Deferred Compensation Approaches, Allen et al., 12th Edition, 2018

- Ch. 2: Strategic Plan Design

Learning Outcomes

4a-4n

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ch. 3: Defined Contribution versus Defined Benefit Plans (pp. 50-54) • Ch. 29: Facilitating Investment of Defined Contribution Plan Assets (pp. 555-561) 	
<i>Fundamentals of Private Pensions</i> , McGill et al., 9th Edition, 2010 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ch. 5: Human-Resource Incentives (excluding pp. 154-156) 	4a-4n
RET101-102-25: Defined Contribution Plan Success Factors	4a-4n
RET101-123-26: CAPSA Guideline No. 3: Guidelines for Capital Accumulation Plans	4a-4n
RET101-104-25: The Hybrid Handbook: Not All Hybrids are Created Equal	4a-4n
RET101-121-25: The Big Chill	4a-4n
RET101-120-25: Design Matters: Plan Distribution Options	4a-4n
RET101-113-25: The Promise of Defined Ambition Plans: Lessons for the United States	4a-4n
RET101-115-25: An Improved Application of the Variable Annuity	4a-4n
RET101-122-25: Innovations in the Canadian Retirement Landscape: CAAT Pension Plan	4a-4n
RET101-119-25: Ch. 1 (pp. 4-11) and Ch. 5 of Pension Policy: The Search for Better Solutions	4e, 4f
Pension Risk Transfer: Evaluating Impact and Barriers for De-Risking Strategies , SOA, Jun 2021 (pp. 8-19 only)	4n
RET101-103-25: Phased Retirement: An Important Part of the Evolving Retirement Scene	4h
RET101-109-25: Designing the Future of Target-Date Funds	4l
RET101-107-26: Introduction and Overview of Retirement Plan Investments	4l
RET101-124-26: The Future of DC Plans: Key Trends for 2025 and Beyond	4l