MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF PROGRAMME FOCUSED ASSESSMENT

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In programmes where course teams know one another and their students, it is relatively straightforward to help students believe they are studying on coherent programmes with clear pathways through the curriculum and intelligible, supportive overall assessment environments. However, the larger the institution and the cohort, the more likely it is that modules and other curriculum delivery components are designed and delivered in isolation, without clear thinking going into what the overall programme experience of assessment is like for the students undertaking them. Ideally we need assessment which is specifically designed to address major programme outcomes rather than very specific or isolated components of the course. It follows then that such assessment is integrative in nature, trying to bring together understanding and skills in ways which represent key programme aims. As a result, the assessment is likely to be more authentic and meaningful to students, staff and external stakeholders (Rust, 2012).

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The HEA assessment review guidelines suggest we should ask whether assessment decisions in relation to design, development and variety made within a programme context are focused on programme learning outcomes (HEA, 2012). Peter Hartley's National Teaching Fellowship Bradford-led project on Programme Level Assessment set out to focus on redressing problems including:

+ not assessing learning outcomes holistically at a programme level;

+ the atomisation of assessment, often resulting in too much summative and not enough formative feedback and over-standardisation in regulations;

+ students and staff failing to see the links between disparate elements of the programme, over-assessment and multiple assignments using repetitive formats;

+ providing modules which are too short for complex learning which tends to lead to surface learning and a 'tick-box' mentality.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

We need to think through carefully what it's like for students if curriculum delivery components are designed and delivered in isolation, without thinking carefully about what the overall programme experience of assessment and feedback feels like (Jessop & Tomas, 2017). One approach in many universities[1] is to explore the extent to which it is possible to map assessment activities and requirements across a programme rather than just in modules, although this is not always straightforward when multiple options are offered, or programmes share modules. We need to clarify how Programme Learning Outcomes reflect what students should achieve, while doing what we can to ensure all staff know what students are expected to learn in their own and other modules, and that all students understand what they are expected to do. Together teams need to agree the most appropriate assessment styles to assess the achievement of the learning outcomes, e.g. project, essay, performance assessment, multiple-choice questions, exam and thereby develop a cohesive offer to students. This can be achieved by:

1. At programme design stage, **convening all who will be inputting curriculum elements** and ask them to consider to what extent does assessment within the programme:

   a. Maximise fast, formative feedback opportunities without driving your markers into the ground?

   b. Support student transition and retention by inducting students carefully into how assessment and feedback works to support student learning on the programme, especially in the early stages?

   c. Assure the standards of assessment against national and PSRB benchmarks?

   d. Provide incremental assessment opportunities?

   e. Use assessment activities that can engage students and be integral to learning (Sambell, McDowell, & Montgomery, 2013)?

   f. Constructively align assignments with planned learning outcomes and the curriculum taught?

   g. Provide realistic tasks: students are likely to put more energy into assignments they see as authentic and worth bothering with?

   h. Maximise the dialogic opportunities for students to engage productively and developmentally in the feedback process as they move through the programme?

   i. Ensure that the assessment design process ensures valid assessment of the intended learning outcomes?

1 See for instance, a mapping tool called 'Map My Programme' devised by University of Greenwich http://www.ld-grid.org/resources/tools/mmp or Manchester Metropolitan University's 'Programme Assessment Management Plan' which is presented as part of the Assessment Lifecycle http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/assessment/

j. Build on shared understandings of commonly-used assessment and feedbackrelated terminology?

2. **Undertaking mapping of assessments on programmes that are already in existence**, by bringing together all module leaders to review coherence, spot overused methods and identify when different modules are requiring simultaneous submissions from students that will be stressful for them and difficult for staff to manage. This can then enable dialogues between all who assess students on a programme so there are shared understandings and agreed overall goals.

3. **Thinking particularly about** an aligned and helpful approach to assessment across all modules within a programme in **the first six weeks of the first semester of the first year**, which is a crucial period for setting good learning patterns essential to achievement and retention (Yorke, 1999) by:

a. Ensuring induction is a valuable and productive introduction to the programme and the assessment/feedback methods in use;

b. Offering low-stakes early formative assessment to help students understand the 'rules of the game' and develop assessment literacy;

c. Familiarising newcomers with the language and culture of the discourses in the subject area they are studying (Northedge, 2003) and assessment/feedbackrelated discourse they'll encounter on the programme;

d. Fostering the information management and other skills that students will need to succeed;

e. Giving students structured opportunities to try out and rehearse diverse approaches to assessment that they will encounter later in the programme such as self- and peer-assessment, group assessment, project work, portfolios and so on;

f. Helping them understand in accessible ways how assessment regulations on matters such as condonements and electronic submission work;

g. Familiarising them with ways of gaining extra support such as in writing development, study skills and language support.

4. **Planning feedback approaches:** this is important so that students are made familiar with the wide variety of feedback approaches they may encounter and learn actively to participate in them in ways that enable them to develop their learning strategies and support them to monitor and enhance their work. Sometimes students only recognise feedback as 'corrective' written comments on submitted work, but it's helpful to help students to see that 'quick and dirty' in-class critique, email comments, written reports on assignments or oral feedback to a whole class are equally valid, rich and useful sources of information that inform the feedback process. It can be valuable if staff across a programme can agree that diverse feedback methods will be used and flagged early in the programme and that efforts be made by all to explore ways that students can initially be required to take on board, discuss and use the feedback they receive (too often students just concentrate on the mark alone (Harland, McLean, Wass, Miller, & Sim, 2015; Wu & Jessop, 2018).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Feedback information is only of value if students have chance to comprehend, internally process and put the information into practice. Arguably the best use of our resources is, therefore, to prioritise feedback discussions which help students to develop a 'nose' for quality answers before they sit an exam, by, for instance, engaging them actively with thinking critically about, and practising, the types of questions they need to prepare themselves to face. Accordingly, in exploring how to offer feedback to students on their exam performance, we need to temper our inevitable desire to do everything we can to help and to respond to their requests, with practical considerations of what is manageable.

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