

# THINKING PROGRAMMATICALLY ABOUT YOUR ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK PRACTICES: THE PROGRAMME SPRING-CLEAN

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This guide provides practical advice for teaching teams who would like to review and refresh assessment and feedback approaches at a programmatic level.

## WHAT'S THE ISSUE/PROBLEM?

Whitfield and Hartley (2019) argue that “the most effective strategy for enhancing the student learning experience and achieve substantial learning gain, alongside other benefits, is to focus upon programme-level rather than module-level assessment”. We agree with them that students should experience a coherent and integrated experience that can make assessment fully integral to learning, and we argue for approaches that are learning-oriented and student-centric rather than performance-oriented and task-centric.

## WHAT ADVICE DO THE EXPERTS OFFER?

While modular programmes offer many benefits, they also create a challenge around how to build a coherent journey for students. Problems can occur when staff and students cannot see the links between elements of the programme and treat modules and their assessments as separate items, with no perceptible coherence within a fragmented curriculum (McDowell, 2012).

It could be said that while students study programmes, staff teach modules. From a student perspective, assessment and feedback that are focused on modules alone can appear inconsistent and disorganised. Even if each module is excellent – with carefully designed opportunities for feedback which feeds forward to subsequent summative tasks, dialogue with students about criteria and standards, and authentic assessment tasks encouraging deep learning about the things that matter – from the student viewpoint there may be no clear progression and coherence to the assessment experience across the board (Price, Carroll, O'Donovan and Rust, 2011).

Unfortunately working in module ‘silos’ can lead to other dilemmas. A pioneering enthusiast who innovates in a single module, without thinking how their approach links to the whole, might find the students feel ill-prepared by their earlier experiences on the programme to undertake a really interesting assessment format. Moreover, research has shown that failure to communicate and plan together across the board can lead to perverse competition, whereby module leaders get into an assessment ‘arms race’ between modules, as each module leader feels compelled to escalate the demands of their own modules, so that students pay their material sufficient attention (Harland, McLean, Wass and Miller, 2015).

Boud et al (2010) argue that assessment for learning should be placed at the centre of subject and programme design and that assessment design should be an integral aspect of curriculum planning from the outset of programme design, and should be systematically and holistically organised to support the development of graduate attributes and the effective management of feedback processes.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Our recommendation is that teams should work together to review programmes, seeking to emphasise the **holistic coherence** of the students’ learning experiences through the design of the curriculum, teaching, assessment and feedback. When this works well, it is apparent to students that assessment and feedback **builds progressively on previous experiences**, Deliberate pathways are created which offer students the chance to experience key assessment types and carry forward the feedback from them to use in similar but increasingly sophisticated or demanding contexts. In this systematic approach, coherence is built through the **gradual and planned** development of skills, insights and attributes, with students learning from assessments and feedback in each module designed to support other assessment activities across the programme.

Adopting a programme-focused approach to assessment helps programme teams to balance the trade-offs which occur when assessment is required to fulfil multiple, often competing, purposes (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Dawson, 2020). Thinking about assessment and feedback holistically at the level of the programme, as described in [Watt Works Quick Guide 13](#) (see also Jessop et al, 2014; McDowell, 2012) has the potential to:

1. Enable teams to map assessment across the board, checking for over-assessment, bunching and pressure points, enabling clarity and linkages to **be expressed and communicated**.
2. Enhance assessment and feedback practice, **improving student engagement and student outcomes** with a positive impact on retention, progression and satisfaction (including NSS scores relating to assessment and feedback).

3. **Reduce staff workloads:** the pandemic alerted us all to the extent to which we regularly over-assess students, and a programmatic approach can help us review how best to slim down multiple disconnected assignments within a module into one integrated authentic assignment: see examples in our [Covid-19 Assessment Collection](#), especially the post on 21 August 2020, which outlines a systematic and efficient approach to assessment task design, and posts of 19 March 2021, 7 May 2021 and 9 June 2021 which provide multiple examples of such an approach in diverse subjects.
4. **Reduce student workloads**, allowing teams to check that the overall workload associated with assessment is manageable and realistic for students. Typically, a programme level consideration provides opportunities at module level to reduce assessment loading but make it more effective for the students. This can therefore allow teams to adequately prepare students for assessment, ensuring they have time, space and explicit support to develop their assessment and feedback literacy.
5. Encourage students' ongoing **engagement with feedback**, building on the principles of assessment for learning, particularly enabling a focus on feedback which is threaded organically throughout the programme as a process involving students throughout rather than feedback being a product delivered to passive consumers/recipients).
6. Help teams think about how and where they **help students to understand how assessment works** and how marks will be awarded, since understanding how the process works can sometimes be a revelation to students. How different criteria are weighted differentially can be easily missed by students who then spend too much time on the wrong things, thereby failing to do themselves justice.
7. Allow teams to plan to **shrewdly select different assessment types** as part of an overall package, choosing the most suitable type of task to test different learning outcomes. For example, if we want students to demonstrate the ability to work constructively as a member of a team, this inevitably means involving them in assessed tasks that require them to work together.

## WHAT CAN COURSE TEAMS DO?

Programmes can get stale and we know from experience that time invested by a team in a half day or day spent 'spring cleaning' the programme is time well spent. This does not necessarily mean radical restructuring: instead we suggest thoughtful collective scrutiny of how well assessment is working to authentically enable students to demonstrate the capabilities, knowledge and professionalism that their programmes require. Some areas may simply need polishing up to make sure they are up-to-date in content and, for example, using up-to-date software systems. Others might need a more radical Marie Kondo style decluttering, where irrelevant or unnecessary elements are removed from a programme to make it more fit-for-purpose. In particular we suggest that you collectively refresh your assessment and feedback approaches and systems in a six-stage process, for which we supply here a checklist of questions:

### Stage one - Mapping out what you are doing currently:

- What are individual assessors in different modules of the programme planning to do/doing already in the way of tasks and assignments?
- Can you map all your assignments together as a team (possibly using post-its on the wall) across the whole programme, year by year, so you can see where your current pinch-points are for staff and students?

- Have you considered whether you are using a variety of assessment types? Is there sufficient variety to focus student engagement but not so many that students are bewildered by endless novelty?
- Have you got too many summative assessment points? And in particular, are you assessing the same aspect or component in the same way more than once, without varying the complexity?
- Is it possible to bring assignments from more than one module together into a capstone project that spans across the programme (see Hartley and Whitfield, 2011)?

**Stage Two - Constructive alignment:** do your assignments align constructively (Biggs and Tang, 2011) with the learning outcomes in a way that is clearly represented in the assignment tasks/activities?

- Is it clear how the different learning outcomes that your documentation claims students will achieve are represented sensibly within the tasks you are asking students to do?
- Are your assessment activities authentic in that they productively engage students in active and meaningful tasks that have real relevance to them as individuals, citizens, contributors to society as a whole, as well as future highly employable graduates? Advice on developing authentic assessments is provided in [Watt Works Quick Guide 31](#)
- Is it clear how the graduate skills and attributes you claim for your programme are taught, fostered, progressively developed and assessed in a systematic way?
- Is the balance of activities in which you require students to engage representative of what you have articulated within your course documentation?
- Have you reviewed what major 'threshold concepts' and troublesome knowledge (Land et al, 2005) your students need to become familiar with at each stage of the programme to ensure they are developed and assessed sequentially?

**Stage three - Ensuring your assessment is inclusive:** have you planned ahead to avoid excessive calls for mitigations for special circumstances which are costly in time and effort if undertaken *post hoc*?

- Have you checked that you are not planning on asking for submissions of major assignments during important religious festivals/ faith events?
- Where you are asking for submissions at a particular time, have you checked this is realistic and sensible in all the time zones where Heriot-Watt students are studying?
- Have you done a risk assessment to ensure that you have plans in place for students with special and additional needs who may need reasonable adjustments to enable them to demonstrate they have achieved the planned learning outcomes? You will save yourselves a lot of time if alternative assignments are planned in from the outset.
- Have you explored the profile of assessment activities you are expecting students to undertake to ensure that cumulatively they are not building towards unreasonable expectations of workload? Could you sense-check this with some current students or alumni to check out whether they feel your requirements are viable and achievable?
- Where you require students to use technologies within their assignments, have you checked their accessibility for students with additional needs e.g. visual impairments/ dyslexia?

#### **Stage four - Ensuring your curriculum design is**

**coherent:** is a systematic approach being adopted across the programme to ensure that students experience assessment in an integrated rather than atomised way? Have you considered:

- The cumulative effect of the individual assessment tasks and feedback at module level across a student's programme of study, looking at how and when assessment and feedback occur?
- The balance of a student's assessment workload, including bunching of deadlines, variety of assessment tasks and opportunities for students' engagement with feedback (and feedforward) across a level of study and across years?
- The balance of formative work and summative assessment and the balance and sequencing of assessment types across the programme, such that students are enabled progressively to master required skills, learn from feedback and demonstrate all the intended learning outcomes?
- How modules build on each other and align effectively to demonstrate appropriate outcomes, and develop appropriate learning and graduate attributes?
- Within modules, the ways in which students will be supported to gauge the progress they're making towards the learning outcomes, understand assessment criteria and standards and develop and improve their learning as the module unfolds?

#### **Stage five - Giving students clear direction through the programme through signposting and waymarking:**

are your students made aware of how assignments have been planned and organised so that their capabilities and knowledge are progressively and sequentially assessed across the whole programme?

- Do you make the links between the formative and summative tasks explicit and communicate the benefits frequently?
- Can learners see how the feedback from one assignment can help them improve their performance on similar tasks in the future (Zimbardi et al, 2017)? Do they recognise how your advice and guidance is transferable?
- Do you phase and scaffold assessment activities so that students progressively develop the skills they need as the tasks they are asked to do become progressively more demanding?
- Do you provide 'anticipatory feedback', for example through thoughtful and detailed briefings to help students better realise how to make a start on an unfamiliar kind of assignment? (See Watt Works Quick Guides **3 Giving formative feedback prior to submitting summative tasks**; **8 Helping students appreciate what's expected of them in assessment**; and **9 Using exemplars to enhance learning and support achievement**) This is likely to save you time since students will be less likely to contact you by email because they are struggling to understand what you want them to do.
- Do you link disparate tasks in an efficient and practical way so that, for example, a literature review, a preliminary findings poster and a final essay within a programme can be designed as a means of scaffolding students' progressive capabilities, ensuring that feedback from early tasks can through feedback help students prepare for the final, potentially higher-weighted task?

- Are students getting support, perhaps within personal tutor meetings, to review patterns of unhelpful activity and to make sense of the feedback they've received to date and to put the advice into practice in future assignments?

**Stage six - Assuring currency:** are your programmes up to date and relevant to the current context?

- Is the knowledge base which your assignments assess relevant to current practice in your specialist area?
- Having looked at the pedagogic literature relating to your subject specialism, are you using the most relevant and fit-for-purpose forms of assessment for your students?
- Where you are using technologies to support your assessment, have you checked that these are the most up-to-date versions? This particularly refers to industry-relevant software systems that students are likely to incur in their working lives as well as data bases appropriate for their research.

### **Conclusions**

Throughout the pandemic, pragmatic changes have had to be made to assessment within programmes, often at very short notice to cope with rapidly changing circumstances. Now is the right time to bring these often-piecemeal approaches together across a programme in a systematic way, retaining the best of the ad hoc work-arounds and ensuring that what ultimately remains works well for students and staff and fully aligns with quality assurance processes. In **Watt Works Quick Guide 13** we argued that the benefits of programme-focused curriculum design and assessment are substantial, even though to achieve some level of cross-programme coherence is hard to achieve.

Whitfield and Hartley (2019) argue for radical redesign approaches with the extensive use of integrative assignments across programmes, which can be particularly valuable when undertaking revalidation or initiating programmes from scratch. The 'spring clean' approach we are proposing here need not require completely rebuilding the programme, rather it can be a gentler approach involving all staff working on constituent modules within a programme getting together to talk with their colleagues so they can, as a team, provide opportunities to maximise the overall learning experience of students, while eliminating unhelpful repetition and streamlining workloads for staff and students. This is likely to prove achievable, manageable within reasonable amounts of time and ultimately invaluable.

You can find all of the assessment and feedback guides from the LTA here: <https://lta.hw.ac.uk/resources/assessment-and-feedback/>

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## NOTES



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