Programme Assessment Strategies (PASS) Evaluation Report

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Contents

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Executive Summary

This report evaluates the impact of the HEA NTFS-funded PASS project, which ran from 1 October 2009 to 31 October 2012, with workshops continuing until July 2013. PASS, a collaborative group of staff from six universities, sought to identify case studies of Programme Focused Assessment (PFA) in a number of institutions and hosted workshops for those interested in this type of assessment.

This evaluation of PASS was conducted by researchers from the Pedagogy Research Centre at Oxford Brookes University. Interviews were carried out between March and May 2013 with three groups of people: PASS workshop participants, leaders and staff from programmes written up as PASS case studies, and staff with a strategic overview of assessment in institutions and national bodies. The evaluation explored the following areas:

- the on-going effectiveness and influence of the PASS initiatives;
- the extent to which PFA is now being seen as a strategic priority in institutions and national bodies;
- how the on-going influence of the project could be supported;
- factors that can either hinder or contribute to the successful implementation of PFA in institutions and programmes;
- recommendations from project participants to others interested in embedding PFA on negotiating barriers and success factors;
- reflections on key findings and recommendations.

Key findings

- PASS workshop attendance had a positive effect overall, leading to engagement with PFA and motivation to implement it, in addition to encouraging staff to think about how they could use PFA in their own institutional contexts. Workshops brought programme teams together, and encouraged them to think about possible changes that could be made.
- The PASS case studies seem likely to have an on-going influence and effect, both on other programmes within case study institutions and on assessment more widely. Case studies presented on the PASS website were referred to by many participants. Case studies are being disseminated in a variety of ways by programme staff and external, non-programme staff.
- Ideas around PFA appear to have gained recognition throughout the sector, although there is less familiarity with the PASS project specifically.
- The lasting impact of PASS could be maintained by retaining the website and its resources and continuing to raise awareness of the project through links with related initiatives.
- Barriers to implementing PFA include programme structure (modularity) and size, regulations and university accreditation systems, buy-in and support by staff and senior management, and student expectations.
- Timing the introduction of PFA to coincide with other changes, such as the decision to go for external accreditation or the introduction of a new programme, frequently aided introduction of PFA. Further to this, the introduction of PFA often coincided with the introduction of external agendas such as that of employability. The availability of relevant resources such as case studies supported the introduction of PFA.

Key recommendations

- Those wishing to embed PFA should ensure that their QA processes, procedures, templates, regulations, and validation arrangements reflect this goal. Programme development teams,

pedagogic leaders etc., should partner with their institutional QA body to support embedding of PFA. *See the 'Regulations' section of the 'Barriers and Success Factors to Embedding PFA' section of this report for more detailed recommendations.*

- The QAA should consider being more explicit in its documentation about expecting to see programme assessment.

- HEA cluster and disciplinary leads should continue to bring PASS resources to the attention of institutions and individual staff.

- Senior management wishing to embed PFA should ensure that evaluation and promotion structures also reflect this goal. Also, in particular, they should be mindful of the unintended innovation-stifling and knock-on effect of the NSS whereby programmes or individual members of staff do not dare to be innovative as this may impact on NSS results. *See the 'Staff-Buy-In' section of the 'Barriers and Success Factors to Embedding PFA' section of this report for more detailed recommendations.*

- The HEA should ensure the PASS website remains accessible and link it to other projects that are theoretically and practically compatible with PASS. *See the 'Recommendations to the HEA' section of this report for more detailed recommendations.*

Introduction

This report evaluates the impact of the HEA NTFS-funded PASS project, which ran from 1 October 2009 to 31 October 2012, with workshops continuing until July 2013. PASS, a collaborative group of staff from six universities, sought to identify case studies of Programme Focused Assessment in a number of institutions and hosted workshops for those interested in this type of assessment. Programme Focused Assessment (hereafter PFA) is assessment that is "specifically designed to address major programme outcomes rather than very specific or isolated components of the course…such assessment is integrative in nature, trying to bring together understandings of subjects and skills in ways which represent key programme aims."[1]

Opportunities for evaluating the impact of the PASS project on staff and students were limited during the three years that the PASS project ran because many of the course developments and examples highlighted by the project were in very early stages of their development. This evaluation investigates the continued impact of PASS and the general state of PFA in the first half of 2013. Part A of this evaluation explores the on-going effectiveness and influence of the main PASS initiatives (workshops, case studies, publications, conference presentations and a final integrative conference were the main outputs) and then investigates the extent to which PFA is now being seen as a strategic priority in institutions and national bodies. It then makes recommendations for how the on-going impact of the project could be supported. Part B highlights the factors that can either hinder or contribute to the successful implementation of PFA in institutions and programmes. It also offers recommendations from project participants to others interested in embedding PFA on negotiating these barriers and success factors. The report concludes with reflections on the report findings and key recommendations.

This report (particularly Part A) will be of interest to PASS group members and participants in PASS initiatives who are curious about the impact of the project. The report (especially part B) will also be useful for anyone interested in initiating and/or embedding programme-focused assessment strategies. The report is also intended to guide the HEA in making the most of their NTFS investment in the PASS project going forward.

Methodology

The evaluation ran over seven months, from December 2012 to June 2013, with data collection taking place primarily between March and May 2013. Three groups of people were interviewed: PASS workshop participants (n=8) were asked about the effectiveness and influence of the workshop on them and their programmes/institutions; leaders and staff of programmes written up as PASS case studies (n=6) were asked about the on-going effectiveness and influence of the case studies; and selected interviewees with an overview of assessment priorities in institutions and national bodies (n=10) were asked about the extent to which they see programme-focused assessment as a strategic priority in institutions and national bodies, that is, whether the PASS project has had an influence on key decision makers. The latter group included a pro-vice chancellor (PVC), a QAA representative, an institutional QA representative, a representative from another national assessment project and six institution leads for learning and teaching (hereafter ILLTs). Some interviewees fell into two categories (such as a Head of Learning and Teaching who also attended a workshop). These interviewees were asked questions from both relevant interview scripts.

In total, 19 people were interviewed. This represents a fraction of those involved in or affected by the PASS initiatives. Case study programme leaders were best represented, as we spoke to six staff from five

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[1] PASS (2012), "PASS Position Paper: The Case for Programme Focused Assessment," p. 3. Available online at http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/position-paper.pdf

Identifier	Workshop	Case Study	Overview
P01		X	X
P02		X	
P03	X		X
P04			X
P05	X		X
P06	X		
P07		X	
P08	X		
P09	X		
P10	X		
P11	X	X	
P12		X	
P13	X		X
P14			X
P15			X
P16			X
P17		X	
P18			X
P19			X

programmes at four institutions out of the total ten programmes at six institutions where case studies were based.[2] Only a small sample of workshop participants were interviewed; whereas over twelve workshops were held[3], with anywhere from eight to forty-two people in attendance at each, research assistants interviewed only eight workshop participants from seven different workshops. Workshops are on-going until July 2013, but as recruitment for this project took place during March and April 2013, only attendees of the earlier workshops are represented.

While it was never the intention of the evaluators to interview everyone influenced by PASS, the evaluators did wish to interview more case study and workshop participants. This was not possible due to lower than expected levels of response to the recruitment.[4] Case study programme leaders were invited to participate by email. Workshop organisers were sent invitations and requested to distribute them to workshop attendees. Eight workshop coordinators obliged in distributing the invitation. Many of these workshop coordinators volunteered to take part, possibly causing our sample to favour the most enthusiastic attendees. Recruitment targets for the PVC/ILLT group were met. We first contacted PVCs and ILLTs at institutions that had hosted PASS case studies, and then filled out this group with PVCs or ILLTs from any other UK HEI currently instigating change in their assessment or programme structure (and thus having at least the potential to institute PFA).

The student perspective is notably absent from this report. It was decided early in the design of the evaluation that it would be prohibitively difficult to recruit students to participate. While this omission is a limitation of the evaluation, it is possible to find student feedback in many of the individual case study write-ups on the PASS website. We also asked case study interviewees to report on student feedback and provide evidence of the student response where possible.

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[2] PASS case study programmes included: Newcastle Business School and MA Design at Northumbria University; Coventry University Business School; the Big Dilemmas Project, Peninsula Medical School and Leadership and Management in the Air Travel Industry at the University of Exeter; the University of Bradford School of Pharmacy; the School of Information Systems, Computing & Mathematics and the School of Health Sciences and Social Care at Brunel University; and the Teesside University School of Science and Engineering.

[3] PASS workshops were held at York St. John University, Oxford Brookes University, Edinburgh Napier University, the Open University, University of Liverpool, University of Leeds, University of Chester, Bradford and Edge Hill University. Workshops were also held at the 2012 SEDA Conference and a Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) event. PFA was integrated into course design intensives run at a Coventry away day. A PASS workshop was run as a webinar in 2013 and at the time of this evaluation further workshops were scheduled at the University of Highlights and Islands, University of Roehampton, Birmingham City University and Leeds Trinity University.

[4] Potential participants were contacted various times over a two-month period through a number of channels. We were limited to recruiting workshop participants through local workshop coordinators due to institutional ethics guidelines. Consequently, we were unable to follow up with this group as effectively as with other groups.

While Oxford Brookes University was a partner in the PASS project, interviewing and report writing were carried out by two Research Assistants (Jane Hudson and Helen Marson-Smith) who were *not* members of the PASS team. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, de-identified and then analysed thematically with the help of qualitative analysis software.

A. Effectiveness and Influence of the PASS Initiatives

This section of the report considers the effectiveness and influence of the PASS initiatives (focussing on the workshops and case studies which were PASS's main methods of engaging with the UK HE sector). A primary objective of our interviews was to establish how effective and influential respondents perceived the PASS workshops and case studies to be. Interviewees were asked to discuss how the PASS initiatives had affected them, personally and on a departmental / institutional level, thus providing an insight into the usefulness of these initiatives and any further actions taken or anticipated as a result of project participation.

Effects of the PASS Workshops

All of the interviewees who attended workshops (n=8) indicated that they felt that their attendance had had a positive effect overall: either on themselves personally, on the specific programme on which they worked, or even on their institution as a whole. Further to this, all eight noted that their institution had already begun to implement programme focussed assessment, or at least to consider doing so. For example, Participant 06 reported that "we are I think still taking this forward, it's still very much on the university's agenda" despite the difficulties that programme had encountered with structure and staff-buy in.

Whether a workshop was scheduled 'out of the blue' or coordinated as part of an on-going effort to embed PFA influenced the effects it had. Participant 09 explained that "Our engagement with PASS has all come at quite a nice time in terms of there's a lot of change starting to happen so I expect it'll inform that change". It should be noted, however, that the workshop attendees we interviewed tended to have engaged significantly with PASS and in many cases they were the person who had taken the initiative to invite PASS to hold a workshop at their institution. This section looks at the effects and actions taken as a result of the PASS workshops.

Workshops motivated and informed attendees

Some participants reported finding the workshops motivating. One described it as leaving her "fired up" (P13). In particular, provision of case study examples from institutions that had already implemented programme focused assessment enabled workshop participants to see it 'in action' and to think about how they could possibly apply these examples to their own institutional context.

> When I saw the case studies, then it became yes we can do them as well. It was more a thing of yes, it's happening out there, and I didn't really have much understanding of it, or perhaps didn't put time or effort into understanding it better, but I think it just gave me that motivation you know when you see and you think, "OK, let's do something and find out more". (P10)

> I think for us the workshop was really useful, because it gave people sight of some alternatives and how it's done elsewhere, and that's important. And Chris talked to us about some case studies, the Brunel one for example and some others that were useful. So I think it was successful in informing people about how things are done elsewhere. (P06)

Attending a workshop led interviewees to think about and evaluate what they were doing in terms of curriculum design and development, to see the positive aspects of PFA and to consider what they could possibly do better.

> I think it probably helped underline what's good about it but also where there could be enhancements. I think it probably underlined that, again, as a kind of almost natural tendency in modular systems that while there's good practice in terms of programme focused approaches to assessment, when we're dealing with modules it does tend to limit your thinking to what happens within the module and how that module's learning outcomes will be assessed. And I think certainly it raised awareness of the challenges in big programmes that might feature potentially dozens of modules, dozens and dozens of modules that students could choose from. It did underline the difficulty of having a programme focused approach, both assessment but also learning and teaching within large programmes within a modular structure. So I think it's kind of highlighted certain things we could do better, I think it's highlighted examples from other institutions that will and in fact are providing really valuable food for thought as we move towards more of a programme focus within the institution. (P09)

All of the respondents who attended workshops had some awareness of PFA prior to their attendance and indicated that the workshops had reinforced and clarified their thoughts about PFA. However, many also felt that the workshops had taught them something new, for instance by providing examples of how PFA works in practice in other institutions (P05, P08, P09, P10), and showing how it could be possible to achieve buy-in from other groups in the institution (P06).

Workshops brought programme teams together

Several interviewees reported that the workshops brought people together and that this led to conversations about the implementation of programme focussed assessment within their programme and/or institution.

> I think the workshop was really helpful in bringing the whole department together even when as individuals you might have thought these things, but it did bring us all together and to my surprise, I thought I might get resistance on that, but it was just so refreshing to see everybody, most of the people, saying, "Yeah I think it's a good idea, let's do it". (P10)

Participant 06 organised a "high level" workshop for programme leaders and "all of our infrastructure that supports assessment". She explained: "we sort of knew what we were going to get, but for us, what we were trying to get was buy-in from other groups around the university, so that's what we were trying to achieve with the workshop."

Other interviewees reported that programme leaders from across their institution attended the workshops, and were then able to feed back to their own teams and to consider a programme level approach (P08).

Workshops informed curriculum review or change

Respondents indicated that their involvement with PASS sparked conversations with colleagues, thus contributing to a further spread of programme-focussed assessment within their institution.

> Certainly here at [institution] it's having an impact and it's providing input into the discussions we're having about a programme focused direction. (P09)

Involvement with PASS was seen as significant in relation to the development of assessment which is increasingly programme-focussed, as well as in relation to overall programme review. Participant 05 reported that "if nothing else, as I said, it will feed into our assessment review". Participant 09 also foresaw an influence:

> I think it'll influence us in the future in terms of how we firm up our plans and approaches to move towards a programme based focus. One of the early things we're going to be doing is having one or two programmes in every faculty redesigned, almost as sort of like pathfinder type programmes so we can exemplify the types of things that might be taken in terms of a programme focused approach. And I know that those involved in that work are very aware of the PASS project and the outcomes of the project, so I expect that will be pulled into that process. So I think at the moment it's largely about informing our own thinking and helping us see which

direction we might take but I think that will become more tangible. I think as we start doing things with our programmes and we think a lot of the principles that the PASS project is promoting, I think a lot of the exemplars that it's pulled together will get translated into things that we do on our own programmes. (P09)

Workshop attendance also informed planned changes to the curriculum, or curriculum review, for some interviewees.

I was talking to a colleague who's actually validating another Masters and is in the process and has gone through the first hurdle with some similar approaches, so she's taken some of the things that we developed, so it's a very slow and incremental process. (P05)

Participant 03 reported that PFA would be her "next goal", after wrapping up another initiative she is leading:

The next goal would be to take a paper to the quality and standards committee around getting them to have a discussion around how you can use synoptic assessment, programme level assessment in creative ways that are suggested by PASS. That's in my kind of road map really in relation to what I would like to achieve. But [current initiative] is a big piece of work and I think we kind of need to get that on board, so I wouldn't necessarily see the next stage happening until sometime next year. (P03)

Participant 10 explained that following a workshop her programme had adapted and implemented an idea from one of the case studies.

Workshop participants are embedding PFA into local practices

Participant 09 noted that at his institution programme focussed assessment would be perpetuated through staff development:

Our team also runs the institutional PG Cert in learning and teaching that all our new lecturers are required to undertake, usually within a two-year probationary period. And again we're, over the summer, going to be reviewing that programme and one of the things that we'll certainly be bringing in is the work of the PASS project and other similar initiatives around programme focused design and assessment. Not least because it's current and it's been discussed in the sector, but also again, because of the direction the institution's taking towards programmes it makes perfect sense that our institutional PG Cert for new academics begins that process in terms of getting them to think about a programme focused approach. So I think the outcomes of the PASS project, the examples that the PASS project has gathered together I think will become an important part of the content of our postgraduate certificate programme for our own staff as well. (P09)

Workshop participants disseminate PASS resources

Some attendees used online case study and workshop materials in order to illustrate PFA to colleagues, and indicated that they found them useful. For example:

I've pointed several other people towards them as well in terms of their own practice [...] I've pointed people towards the website but also I think there's a short PDF guide, I've pointed a few people towards that and I've made use of the workshop materials in relation to staff development events as well, so picked up one or two of the slides that are in the workshop materials to use as part of sessions that type of thing...I think the resources are really useful, I think they're really valuable. I think there are still some good principles for people to think about, I think they give good examples for people to think about and that could potentially inform their own practice. (P09)

Further to this, another interviewee developed her own online resource, incorporating useful information from the PASS website:

> I did write a blog, which we have, an Academic Development blog. So I wrote a blog about it and included a link to the slides which includes information about who to contact and all that sort of thing at the end so that's on the system. (P13)

There were a small number of cases where workshop attendees' colleagues had been less receptive to ideas about programme focused assessment generated by workshops. For example, P13 noted that after attending the workshop, she felt "quite fired up" by the idea of programme level assessment and tried to encourage colleagues to take part, but they had not done this:

> I did write to my colleagues in one of the faculties and said, "This will be super for you!" kind of thing and, 'You should get them back before the project finishes.' But actually they didn't take me up on it, and these things happen, but I did really try because I thought it could be quite influential in some work that they were doing but there you go. (P13)

Summary

In summary, the PASS workshops had the following effects:

- Motivating attendees
- Informing attendees about PFA (often reinforcing what they were already aware of)
- Encouraging attendees to talk to colleagues about PFA
- Informing curriculum change and integration of PFA into programmes of study
- Enabling networking and further discussion within teams and with others interested in PFA

On-going Effectiveness and Influence of the PASS Case Studies

At the time of the interviews, all the case study staff that we spoke to were still using and attempting to improve PFA in their programmes. One programme leader felt his programme may have drifted somewhat from PFA principles, but was planning on reviewing how things were going. This section looks at the extent to which the influence of the PASS case studies is on-going.

Case studies influence other programmes inside and outside the institution

The programme leader of one case study was able to validate a new programme based on PFA.

> I think it has delivered in real terms because it's created another programme out of what I feel is really good practice in the first. So this approach begets more of the same I think or variations on the same, because it delivers in my opinion. (P02)

Many of the case study staff members and programme leaders we interviewed felt that their case study had influenced other programmes within their institution (P11), at every level from raising awareness – "I think it has thrown a spotlight and I think it is starting to be looked at by other staff" (P07) – to the successful validation of a new follow-up programme based on PFA.

In many cases, programme leaders identified PASS as one factor, but not a dominant factor in their assessment strategies

> In my experience, it's been a factor in our thinking. It hasn't been the driver behind the move towards more programme-focussed assessment. It has been something that has helped our thinking. My guess is that in the universities where they don't have the absolute driver of an accreditation to go for, I would say PASS would likely have some effect, but I cannot offer an opinion as to how great that would be…. The other changes at the level of the programme have been more around the dissertation, where we've been bringing in these programme goals to measure them explicitly within the dissertation, which didn't take place before. And that's partly as a result of the thinking related to PASS, but it's also related to the accreditation. (P12)

Case study staff are involved in dissemination

Participants 02 and 17 mentioned specific dissemination that they had done; including presentations to colleagues they had done or planned to do. Other case study staff reported sharing their knowledge of PFA with others inside and outside their institution who had contacted them with enquiries (P02, P11).

Many interviewees felt that the PASS case study would influence their programme or institution in the future. One interviewee described the case study as "the start of a change in direction," stating that "we're at least at the stage where we're starting to move in that direction and I think it will, when we come to review our courses it's on the agenda now in a way that it wouldn't have been before" (P07). Others said that there were thoughts of replicating something similar in other programmes, but that it had not happened yet (P12, P11).

Some case study staff described themselves as coming out of their experience with PASS as advocates for PFA. In this way, PASS would continue to have an influence wherever they worked: "as these debates happen in the university, I have up my sleeve some of the outcomes of PASS to use" (P01). One case study programme leader felt that she and other case study staff would be "a sort of legacy" of PASS and contribute to its long term impact by promoting PFA in other programmes with which they become involved:

> This has really opened up a whole new area for me around educational development and thinking more about what we do and why we do it in terms of the delivery and structure of the programme and how closely linked that is to the effectiveness of the learning. So I would like to think that myself and perhaps other people who've been involved in the programme will be the sort of legacy and that as I go through my academic career and teach on different programmes and get involved on different courses, I will carry that with me as a possible part of a wider toolkit about things that we can do to enhance learner experience. And it's certainly something that, I don't want to evangelical about it, but it's certainly something that I would consciously seek to share with colleagues. (P02)

A participant as committed and passionate as participant 02 has the potential to have a large influence on the sector over the span of his/her career.

People are making use of case studies on the PASS website

The case study write-ups were all posted on the PASS website. Not everyone we spoke to knew about the case studies on the PASS website, but those who did found them very useful. Several people mentioned they were useful in helping them not have to "reinvent the wheel" (P06, P17). Others felt that the case studies would support them in making a case for PFA to others in their programme or QA office (P03, P17). Participant 03 envisioned using the case studies to say: "'here's an institution that's not dissimilar to ours and then did something and it was demonstrated to be a really effective way and students liked it.'"

Some interviewees mentioned sending a link to the case studies to their colleagues (P06, P09). People who were involved in the case studies were likely to have referred to other case studies on the website. One case study programme leader reported, "I actually sent out an email the other day saying to some of my colleagues, 'Must we look at what they're doing on PASS and some other bits and pieces in relation to what we're doing with the HEA'" (P17). This interviewee felt that PASS had a large impact on the sector.

> [PASS is] definitely there under a lot of people's skin and it's on a lot of people's radar, whether it's on the periphery or quite centred. It's very well known, if you start talking about it people say, "Oh yes, I have heard of that." And they think, "Oh yeah I meant to go and read up on something of that." So I think it's seeping in very much in many, many places. [...] So yes, will you be able to identify specifically it's changed this or that, but I think probably it's affecting more than might be obvious in some ways. I think it's also something people are referring to more when it comes to revalidation of modules and programmes and are looking at assessment. I think it's something that they are probably going to but they might not... if they're just doing it to inform their decision

making process and it's not going to get cited or referenced, it's just something they're doing internally. But I think it is something that a lot of people are turning to when it comes to redesigning various bits and pieces. (P17)

Non-programme staff are disseminating case studies

One staff member whom we interviewed reported that the basics of the approach had been taken up by the central academic development department and was being used as a case study for those interested in PFA (P07). Another said the external examiner of his programme requested to share ideas about the case study with some of his contacts (P12).

Summary

- The PASS case studies are currently all still implementing PFA.
- Case study staff have been disseminating the case studies through presentations and by distributing the website.
- The case studies are also being disseminated by external examiners and academic development unit.
- Dissemination has allowed the case studies to influence other programmes inside and outside of the case study institutions.
- Case study staff could have a key role in any on-going influence of PASS.

PFA as a Strategic Priority in Institutions and National Bodies

We spoke to ten people who have an overview of assessment priorities, including one PVC, six institution leads for learning and teaching (ILLTs), one QAA representative, one QA representative, and one leader of a national assessment project. Every person we spoke to was, in principle, on board with programme-focused assessment. As one interviewee described, "it's an idea which when you put it to a group of enthusiastic educators in any context, they just get it" (P01). From the people we spoke to, however, there is no clear take-away message about whether PFA is a strategic priority in institutions and national bodies.

Half of the IILT group was well aware of PASS, and the other three were peripherally aware. Of those that were aware of PASS, all three felt that there were members of staff who were very interested in PFA, but there hadn't been a lot of success in implementing it. Two felt it was a matter of QA regulations and another felt that competing initiatives took precedence. Of the three who were peripherally aware of PASS, one felt that PFA was not on the agenda at her institution, even though the institution had hosted a successful case study. Another felt that PFA was already integrated in her institution through other initiatives (P15). The third agreed that the ideas were familiar to her:

> If it was completely outside of my understanding it wouldn't have chimed with us so yes of course it make sense and yes of course we think about those sorts of things and worry about that kind of atomistic assessment and worry about all of those sorts of things and it was quite nice to see something played out, that they've done some thinking about those ideas. (P13)

The PVC we interviewed stated that PFA is integral to his institution's assessment strategies, but he was only peripherally aware of PASS. Similarly, a QA representative was vaguely aware of PASS but was in the process of simplifying QA processes at his institution to "shift some of the emphasis back on the importance of the programme and the achievement of the programme-level learning outcomes" (P18). He reported that he was motivated to make these changes by a combination of factors:

> …of course experience of operating programmes within that type of modular framework and then re-approval and so experience that's been gained from operating that for some time. It's also been drawn from a changing focus within our internal quality assurance processes departments and perhaps different viewpoints, and it's also I suppose a reflection of the maturing quality assurance frameworks and the rewriting of aspects of the QAA code. (P18)

When we spoke to a QAA representative, he reported:

> We're currently revising the chapter of the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education] on assessment at the moment, in fact about to go out to consultation on it at the end of this month. And certainly some of the discussions we've had in developing that draft chapter have been around the assessment of learning outcomes and the fit, I suppose, between programme level and module or unit level. But there hasn't been a discussion specifically of integrated assessment and what, if anything, we might say about that. From my point of view that's interesting in terms of whether or not it's something that we might want to say a little bit more about. (P19)

It is clear that the ideas of PFA have spread widely across the sector, even among people who have never heard of PASS. The PVC we spoke to, who was committed to PFA, was only vaguely aware of PASS:

> It hasn't influenced me directly. .. I think the things we've decided to do we did for other reasons and have arrived at this solution, which just happens to chime with the work that's being done on PASS. I don't see it as being… I think it's a happy coincidence rather than being influenced *by*. (P14)

An ILLT who was also only peripherally aware of PASS felt that PFA was integrated at her institution. She offered a perspective on her lack of familiarity with PASS:

> Well no, but they may not have wanted to get visibility as a project, I mean all of those ideas that you've just said about programme learning outcomes, integrative assessment, all of those ideas are commonly known at [university] and are part of the [assessment initiative], which has had a massive impact at [university]. So maybe not the title of the project but those ideas I would say are there. (P15)

Participant 04 believed that this familiarly with PFA but not PASS may be due to the fact that a number of other initiatives supporting a programme-based approach have been operating within the sector.

> I think there have been several things that have been happening at the same time, I wouldn't attribute it probably all to PASS but I think PASS has had a significant drawing together of minds which has been very impacting […] I think the conversation will continue partly attributed to the work of PASS but partly attributed to a lot of other variables coming together at the same time, and being able to say that that's wholly one project or the other I don't think you're going to ever get an accurate answer on that. (P04)

An ILLT talked about how the ideas were percolating through the sector in a way that might not be immediately visible.

> Very rarely does an idea catch and become so pervasive very quickly, things seep don't they, into practice. And I think sometimes it would be quite difficult to determine the origin of a practice in an idea or even in a research project because things have seeped and developed and become contextualised and things. But ideas like this I believe do feed change and do have an impact and I'm aware that the impact is very difficult to pin down. […] So yes I think it will have an impact, whether it's a measurable and an easy to see impact that's difficult to say. (P13)

This notion that the PASS ideas are quietly seeping through the sector was supported by several case study interviewees (P09, P17).

As the previous sections of this evaluation have shown, a core group of people who are very committed to PFA have emerged from the PASS project. This led participant 04 to feel "moderately confident…that the conversation will stay alive for some period of time" in the institutions where PASS has been actively engaged. One interviewee felt that this group was all that emerged from the project.

> I think PASS has been an interesting project but I <pause> in terms of our influence on the wider academic community, I don't know that we've got a very long way…the constraints and the barriers that I think we've discovered in our work, make me more cynical about whether it will have an impact beyond a small, very

enthusiastic group in this country at the moment. I mean maybe in a year, or a few years' time people will pick it up, dust it off. (P01)

Participant 04 stated that a major impediment to the impact of the PASS project would be rapid changes in the external environment (P04).

Summary

- While not that familiar with PASS, most interviewees in the PVC/ILLT group were familiar with PFA.
- A number of initiatives in the sector have been supporting PFA.
- Interviewees from the 'overview' group were generally in agreement that PFA ideas are seeping through the sector.

Recommendations to the HEA

As PASS reaches its conclusion, it is significant to consider what its lasting impact may be, and furthermore, how this can be supported by the HEA. Suggestions to this effect are made below:

Retain the website and case studies

The PASS website has been extremely helpful for those wishing to introduce Programme Focussed Assessment. Interviewees who commented on this were keen for it to be retained, pointing out the continued usefulness of the online case studies for those wishing to adopt programme focussed assessment. Further to this, one respondent (P09) noted his willingness to share further examples that could be used as case studies; another suggested adding course maps (P05).

It may be helpful to include a wider variety of case studies on the website to support the variety of institutions that may want to implement PFA. For example, one respondent noted:

> It would be quite useful to have case studies of institutions maybe like ours where actually in order to be able to do this type of work that they've had to get on board the registrar and make regulatory changes so that you could see that that would be useful evidence. So when it comes to me writing a paper for our quality committee I'd say, "Well look, this university couldn't do it because of their regulations, but they've managed to get through that process". (P03)

Additionally, vehicles for sharing ideas could be developed, such as a forum for those who are interested in programme focussed assessment to share their ideas about how it can be done, as was suggested by one interviewee (P12).

Finally, if the website is not going to be updated now that the project is coming to an end, it should be made clear that this is the case, as this is an area where progress is likely to continue to be made but this would not be reflected on the website. In the words of one interviewee:

> I always feel very strongly that if websites are going to stay up, but they're not being updated, it should be very clear that that's happening, it should somehow be clear that it's an archive website with no changes, because I'd be worried about being part of a project, attached to a project where things weren't changing as they changed outside. (P01)

This would mean that people using the website would be aware that the case studies do not necessarily reflect the current thinking or position of the institutions in question.

Raising awareness and dissemination of the PASS project

Many participants felt that further dissemination of the PASS findings were necessary for the PASS project to have a continued impact.

> Well actually I was just thinking about this today and these big projects and centres of excellence and so forth and I was just thinking that so much good work goes on but somehow they just get lost somewhere, so I don't know is the answer. I can only think it will if you have the resources and the means to continue to promulgate it at different events, and for people to be in touch with people like me who could maybe think, "Oh that would fit in with our conference," or whatever. So unless you can do something active and I think probably get a few more case studies on your website, there is a danger that it may not, and not because of the quality of the work's not good or the ideas, but just if there isn't that constant promotion of it, so people are aware of it. (P08)

For example, one respondent noted that this project needs to be brought to the attention of those involved in teaching and learning within faculties:

> I just think it's a very useful project and I think more people can benefit from it, but I think it just needs a little bit more proactive awareness, rather than just as research project awareness. I don't know if you see what I am trying to say. I think it should be brought to the attention of the teaching and learning, within the faculties rather than just as a research project that's happening. I think sometimes staff are not as active as one thinks in looking up these projects and so on. (P10)

Similarly, targeted dissemination, for example developing information targeted at those working in a specific area, could be used to alert potentially interested parties to the resources that PASS has available:

> We found PASS as an example really useful in terms of things we might bring into our PG Cert, things we might bring into staff development workshops. I just wonder whether, in terms of dissemination, whether the PASS project's done any targeted dissemination? I think if it hasn't I think it would be worth some sort of concise information that could be sent out to maybe the leaders of postgraduate learning and teaching certificates for example just to alert them to the resources that are there. I think that could certainly be worth doing. (P09)

PASS is part of a whole raft of similar programme-based initiatives, and joining the outcomes of these projects together within a larger strategic endeavour could lead to a wider impact. This was noted by several interviewees (P01, P08, P09, P12):

> I think PASS could do with joining up with one or two other projects a bit more closely […] I think for busy academics and programme managers who are looking for ways forward, they're not going to spend time looking at all those projects separately if they spend time looking at them all together, so if there was one thing, if there was some money around for someone to do it, pulling together the outcomes of those projects, and spending time on producing something which takes the best out of them and makes it accessible to busy programme managers, you might then get the material used. So that's a possible way forward in terms of bigger impact. (P01)

For example, a link to PASS could be added to the A Marked Improvement project, the Brookes Assessment Standards Manifesto and TESTA. It could also be linked to projects related to the employability agenda. The HEA Cluster Leads could be made aware of PASS and its relevance so that they could point programme staff pursing PFA or a compatible goal toward the resource.

B. Barriers and Success Factors to Embedding PFA

The following barriers and success factors were all brought up by interviewees. Programme structure, regulations and staff buy-in were the factors most often mentioned in determining the success of efforts to embed PFA. Interviewees' suggestions for how to overcome barriers and take advantage of success factors are also included.

Programme Structure & Size

The most mentioned, most obvious structural barrier to implementing PFA was modularity. Participant 16 offers a typical explanation of this barrier:

> The first barrier is around the whole: how do you get these things accredited? It's the credit point system, which I'm thoroughly in agreement with in principle 'cause of flexibility and access and all of those sorts of things, but the trouble is what do you associate the credit points with? If, as you do here, almost everything gets broken down into 30 credit modules so that people can have a choice and do 30 credits here, 30 credits there but the problem is then how do you take some credits out of that to join it all up and do some more holistic assessment? It's just the way we approve things, the way things go through formal programme approval, module approval, doesn't allow us to do it… at the moment. (P16)

Other structural barriers mentioned were part-time courses for professionals and highly modular distance courses. Some suggested that very large courses posed a challenge to getting everyone together. Similarly, a case study programme leader of a very small programme felt that the smallness was a factor in the success in embedding PFA.

Recommendations

In a sense the PASS project itself is a recommendation for how to negotiate the barriers that modular programme structures present to implementing programme-focused assessment. Nevertheless, some specific recommendations can be made. Participant 09 suggested that programme teams think holistically about what the programme is about, not just in terms of formal learning outcomes but also the broader skills that the programme team might be seeking for them to develop. Programme teams in some of the PASS case studies got around this problem by implementing a style of PFA that sat outside of regular class time, in a designated week. Many of the recommendations from the 'regulations' section also apply.

Regulations

Regulations were among the barriers to embedding PFA most cited in our interviews. Interviewees described university accreditation systems as "very hard to change" (P01) and said trying to engage with QA issues and assessment regulations was like "hitting a brick wall" (P03).

Many interviewees characterised the institution accreditors as conservative powers, stifling or "not allowing" innovation, creativity, or "radical thinking" (P01).

> The earlier, very, quite radical thinking that they did around assessment for that programme got mediated and pulled back by concerns about the accreditation [...] It's very hard to change university accreditation systems, often the powers that own them and run them, are often very conservative so make sure there's some level of flexibility. And that often means starting in a rather boring place, instead of starting with the creative, curriculum ideas which often do inspire people to want to do this sort of thing, you've got to start in the structures, which people often just don't want to get into really. (P01)

Another interviewee characterised QA as "gatekeepers" controlling what programmes were allowed to do. He described needing "to get [PFA] past our academic office" (P05). By being "quite devious" he was able to make soft changes that might be less than satisfactory: "you're not going to get all the way down the line to a sort of fully fledged PASS module, but I think you can get part-way there" (P05). Another interviewee was interested in identifying "wiggle room" and "stretching modules to fit" (P08).

Not all interviewees felt that QA regulations were unchangeable. One interviewee suggested amending QA processes:

> I think the only way for us to get this to have a meaningful effect in the institution is for us to put together a proposal which goes to our central quality and standards committee which would then ask for a review of regulations which would allow people to engage with this as a possible framework for assessment. (P03)

Another interviewee felt that designing better forms would help alleviate the accreditation problem:

> Well I suppose it can't be beyond the wit of humankind to set up forms, if you have to have forms which I can understand why you do, whereby it's made clear that something is done at the programme level and other things are done at module level. There are all sorts of ways you could design it but there just doesn't seem to be any accommodation for any of that sort of thinking. (P16)

Interviews highlighted how something as simple as the format as a form can have unintended consequences. For example, if QA forms ask staff to map learning outcomes onto modules, but do not ask them to look at the programme, these forms will have the effect of steering people toward a module-focused approach.

Some interviewees clearly felt a strong sense of opposition from the QA office. One interviewee linked the regulation problems to fact that the academic office is "looking over their shoulders at the QAA" (P05). He saw the QAA as the reason why the academic office set limits on the number of assessments in modules and disallowed multi-phased assessment (P05). Another interviewee was sympathetic to the QAA – "I'm perfectly sure that it's not their intention to damage learning by having a system that's not sufficiently flexible" (P16) – but still felt overwhelmed by the changes that would need to be made:

> It just needs a bit of creative thinking as to how you'd do it and still make it work in all the ways it needs to work, but at the same time allows a system to accredit discrete parts of that learning as well. How difficult can it be? It's not that difficult and yet it seems to be impossible. I don't know. (P16)

It is clear that many of the participants felt stifled by regulations. Other interviewees, particularly those coming from a position of leadership, did not believe regulations were an insurmountable problem.

> Regulations are generally there to support you to do what you want to do and if they're being a barrier then you need to tell someone that they're being a barrier because I don't think that's the point of regulations actually. So they're largely to make sure you've got monitoring and to ensure quality and all of that and actually to facilitate you to do what you want to do. And I also think people often use the regulations as an excuse for not changing. (P15)

Another interviewee felt that these regulations were largely mythical, and that these myths were more responsible for inaction than the regulations themselves:

> And those myths, the minute you speak to the people who would be responsible for them dispel them instantly, but the whole institution and members of staff in quite significant numbers believe something is either not allowed or shouldn't be done or is going to be difficult, will then not look to take it any further. (P04)

Evidently there is a major disconnect in terms of what is and is not possible. Regulations differ from one institution to the next, but it is still noteworthy that several leaders and experts in teaching and learning found regulations insurmountable. As one interviewee explained "systems, even for somebody like me who is supposed to be really fully aware of all these sort of things, are stopping us doing the kind of assessment that we want to do" (P16).

We interviewed a QAA representative, who asserted that there isn't anything in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education that would be a specific barrier to developing integrated assessment (P19). He explained that the Quality Code is concerned with "setting out really high level principles about how assessment is conducted and then it being a matter for individual institutions to implement that within their own regulatory frameworks and practices" (P19).

> If you look at each chapter of the Quality Code you'll find that what we're setting out are high level statements of principle, it's not a detailed instruction manual or anything like that, but then it's up to each institution to take those principles and to work with them and to reflect them within their own institutional regulations and

practices. Some of which of course will be shaped by their own mission, their own approach to things and that's why you get very different approaches in different institutions. (P19)

…It's about the general principles of rigour and fairness and transparency rather than about telling institutions how to devise their regulatory frameworks or their individual practices. And I think that looking at the kind of ideas that the PASS project sets out and the examples that it gives, it seems to me that they probably are compatible with those general principles. (P19)

The QAA representative believed that specific barriers to PFA were more likely to exist at the QA level.

I think where the issues may arise may be with institutions own regulatory frameworks. And it may be that when people are saying, 'Well it's QAA who are stopping us doing this' it might actually mean it's their own regulations that are the difficulty and the way that they [the regulations] have translated the principles of the Quality Code rather than the Quality Code itself for example. (P19).

Another interviewee at the QA level in an institution that has hosted a PASS case study also agreed that there are myths around regulations.

There is a lot of myth about what people can and can't change, we're trying to dispel that through having twice a year course teams come together at formal times for a day each to discuss their teaching and learning assessment strategy for the next year and they do have an action plan for change. (P14)

Thus conflicting views are evident here: some respondents saw regulations as barriers, but others perceived regulations to be less problematic than the myths of rigidity and inflexibility that surround them.

Recommendations

As regulations had caused difficulties for many of the staff interviewed, many interviewees offered advice about this topic, including the need to:

- make sure that the institution's accreditation system has the potential to adjust and adapt to the introduction of PFA, if this is what is desired (P01, P03);
- discuss ideas with QA as early as possible, and get advice as early as possible in the process. Develop that open, questioning relationship (P18);
- work within the system; unless there is buy-in from high up in the institution, only incremental changes will be possible (P05);
- (from an interviewee from QA) employ someone at the QA level with a remit to work with the faculties to help them facilitate and forestall problems before they get to an approval event (P18);
- ensure that senior management spreads the conversation wider than just the senior management teams, communicating clearly with staff that other changes are available (P04);
- Future work may be needed on how standard QA regulations which typically assume 'standard' modular structures can be amended to allow PFA initiatives and then communicated effectively to academic staff.

Staff Buy-In & Senior Management Support

Another one of the barriers to embedding PFA most mentioned by interviewees was staff buy-in. Interviewees related this to busyness (P03, P04), resistance to change (P03, P04), initiative fatigue, academic autonomy/investment in modules (P02, P04, P07, P13) and lack of familiarity with evidence-based pedagogy (p02). The problem was seen as being especially challenging with very large programme teams (P06). Participant 07 mentioned the ability of rogue members of staff to "scupper" the project (P07).

I think one of the major obstacles is the resistance to change and I know the people, I've worked here for three years so I know the people now who I can go and say, "What do you think about this?" And they'd go, "Oh yeah that's really exciting, we really ought to do that." And I can tell you the people now who'd go and say, "Oh no,

> what do we wanna do that for? You're going to make me have to think hard and do something different and I really haven't got the time." (P03)

Participant 15 mentioned the difficulty of simply getting everyone into the same room.

Recommendations

Interviewees gave different, sometimes conflicting advice as to how to get all staff on board. Some of the advice seemed targeted toward a bottom-up approach to staff buy-in. Participant 12 recommended that when new tutors are hired, they should be inducted into the PFA programme. Participant 13 suggested using a 'summit' format whereby the team gets together and works out what kind of programme they want in an intensive meeting (P13).

Some interviewees felt that sometimes decisive action was necessary.

> I think with most academics what we've found is if you discuss things they'll discuss them forever and they'll moan or whatever, but once you make a decision they'll make it happen, so at certain points you've got to be prepared to say, "Make a definitive decision" ...we ran a number of informative lunchtime meetings where we talked about what we were designing, try to get the staff's feedback in general and then said: "Right, this decision's been made now, that's what we're sticking with." (P17)

Others agreed that higher level support was vital: "sometimes it was when the email would come out from the dean to say, "This is what's happening" that was a lot more powerful coming from us, 'cause we're all on the same level really as academic staff so seeing the clear support from the Dean was important in that" (P17). Further to this, another participant expressed the need for institutional support to take the form of some leeway in results: "Some colleagues have said categorically no. Yet we've been told by our deanery that any innovative practice you do we'll accept the failures that's what innovation's all about" (P11).

Participants 01 and 05 agreed that it was very useful to have the support from senior management. One senior manager offered advice on how to implement PFA from the top down:

> You need to develop a narrative at a strategic level, then you can translate the narrative to the course directors, the people who lead the academic development, and then get them and their course teams together and facilitate them in that narrative if you like. So there needs to be facilitation of the conversations that they have about their assessment strategies. Let each of the module tutors talk about their experience and then in most cases they've never talked about the assessment they do on each of the modules, it gives them the chance to do that, and then they'll find interesting opportunities to work together. I don't think it's very complicated, but it just takes time...Well some people are very precious about their own territory, so you need to be sensitive to people's feelings but sometimes you have to stamp on their feelings as well because sometimes they're wrong. You know just as I'm wrong, they can be wrong too, and sometimes we have to be clear about that and say, "No this is the way we're going, this is the reason, we've signed up to it, this is the journey, please get on or get off, get out!" So yeah, it's pretty… it's not brutal in any way, it's actually very developmental but it is the journey we're taking. (P14)

Participant 08 saw this support from senior management as a tool that could be used in conjunction with staff development as a driver:

> There has to be strategic direction, I've talked about our vice principal, he's got an academic agenda, that's clear to everyone, he's explained it, he's enabling consultation from staff across the university, so everyone's able to contribute their views on it. So I think it has to be led, but it has to be consultative, so that it can capture good practice and capture people's views on the ground, I think that's essential. (P08)

Participant 08 also had views on the role of staff development in implementing PFA in conjunction with senior management support.

> Development is important so that people have got the time and space to think out these things and to enable the sharing of practice. So if someone's doing something good, we can coordinate and facilitate an opportunity for other people to learn about it...So if there was that strategic driver towards programme focussed assessment or more widely at a programme based approach, then I think that gives an opportunity because all universities will have professional development or academic professional development programmes that seek to help universities achieve their strategic objectives. So I think it's important to have the strategic drivers first of all and then to find opportunities to enable people to experience the sorts of workshops that Peter offered to us and that could be done through a workshop or as I said, perhaps sharing a practice" (P08).

Participant 01 made a suggestion that tried to resolve the desire to embed PFA but not to do it from the top down; she suggested that institutions wishing to implement PFA should find a few teams where the whole team backs it, and work from there (P01).

Student Expectations

It is important to think about and manage what students expect from their programme of learning, and to explain the reasons for any changes in assessment that are being introduced. Several interviewees mentioned that students had particular expectations of how their programmes would be delivered, and these were sometimes based on an expectation of a modular programme. Thus students need to have PFA and the reasons behind it explained to them:

> Inevitably students see the module; you can't get away from that. They always ask "How do I pass the module?" And it's perhaps finding a way of just telling them. "Well it's not just the module. Do you realise that we're actually looking to see if we're achieving at the level of the programme as well?" (P12)

> At the moment students are so used to this incremental "I have 30 credits here and I'll have 30 credits there" I think one would need to set up a persuasive narrative, which you could certainly do but would take a little bit of time, for the students themselves to explain to them why there needs to be a different approach or a particular approach to thinking in terms of whole programmes and not necessarily just discrete units. (P16)

Indeed, in some cases, student perceptions had been problematic when implementing PFA, with interviewees mentioning that some of their students had been "very confused" (P11) and suffering from "learning shock" (P02). However, there were examples of successful implementation of PFA, which the students understood and accepted as part of their programme. For example:

> As we did a rolling programme just starting with the first years, then it went to the second and then to the third the first years turned up and, "This is what you're getting, this is why we're doing it." So they sort of accepted it and then when they got to second year they already had one experience of it, then they moved into third year so it was a natural progression. I think if we just brought it into our third years and said, "Here, we're doing this" then it probably would've been more difficult. And as when you say to the students, "This is part of the framework within your programme and across the school, there's a module every year which is a group problem solving module where you'll work in teams, you'll self-assess, peer assess, you'll produce a product, we'll be looking at the process as well." They were aware that it was coming up and therefore probably, as students, accepted it a little bit more whether they liked it or not, it was just it was there and they knew early on. (P17)

There is certainly potential for PFA to be understood by students and accepted as part of their course of study: for example, staff believe that students come to university to do a programme and not a series of modules, so in theory they should be on board (P08). As with many initiatives, staff reported that in some instances students were completely unaware that they had been involved in any special type of assessment: "Maybe the students are learning invisibly, that the teaching is so integrated that they're unconsciously using it to make these decisions [...] but we're not entirely sure about that" (P12). Further to this, one participant (P17) believed that students would only really come to appreciate PFA when they were coming to the end of their programmes and beginning to think about how what they had learned on their degree programme applied to the 'real world'.

Recommendations

Those attempting to embed PFA must understand *why* they are doing so in order to craft a narrative for students that will help them to make relevant connections. Linking to real-world problems helps students to see the relevance of PFA (P17). Student engagement can be further encouraged by allowing students to have some input into PFA (P05). It is also vital that PFA is shown as something that is running throughout the programme, if indeed this is the case. Participant 17 gave the sample explanation: "This is running throughout your programme in Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3 and you'll be able to re-use the skills and build on them. It's not just a one off and you'll come across it again the second year and again in the third year so hopefully you're getting better at it, what's to come."

Timing

Many interviewees mentioned timing as a critical factor in embedding PFA. Often the introduction of PFA coincided with other changes, such as the introduction of new programmes, a decision to go for a particular type of external accreditation, or the appointment of a new member of senior management. As one case study programme leader described:

> When something's happening anyway, you've got change happening and there's ideas on the table and people are being asked to put ideas on the table, it might be a time to re-raise something big like this (P01).

Validating new programmes and re-validating or reviewing programmes was seen by some interviewees as an opportune time to embed PFA. Other opportunities mentioned were institutional initiatives and external initiatives: for example, one interviewee (P09) noted that the Scottish QA currently have an enhancement theme around supporting the curriculum, and that this had led colleagues to rethink the curriculum, what it should look like and the introduction of possible innovatory approaches such as PFA. The appointment of a new senior manager also affords an opportunity to introduce changes: participant 08 mentioned making sure that a new vice principal understood how PFA fit into the wider programme-based approach that was encompassed within the mission he had in joining the university.

Recommendations

It is sometimes possible to take advantage of timing when attempting to introduce PFA, for example, when programmes are being reviewed (P09), education strategies within the university are being revised (P01) or a new member of senior management is considering changes (P08).

Institutional & External Agendas

External agendas can also facilitate the introduction of PFA. For example, some interviewees noted that the employability agenda had served as a boost to their efforts to implement PFA. One institution tied PFA into the employability agenda very directly, instituting some activities that were intended to give students concrete examples of soft skills (P17). PFA fit well with another case study programme's decision to go for an external accreditation (P12). Some interviewees saw PFA as a way of uniting various agendas.

Participant 16 speculated about a possible overlap between 'big agendas' and PFA:

> I do think the fact that there are certain agendas that the institution needs to address, needs to be seen to be addressing and indeed to address that this kind of thing could play quite well with. So big agendas, obviously like some I've mentioned like employability or sustainability or interdisciplinarity in terms of preparing people for complex challenges in research or whatever, sort of in postgraduate programmes, those kind of things, seem to me to push into the favour of some more holistic thinking about assessment and more holistic thinking about programme design. And even something like developing digital literacies whereby the kind of world in which students are learning is a huge and endless and continually developing set of interactive digital opportunities for knowing things and exploring things. That if we don't address that somehow and recognise that as being a kind of holistic thing that we could use to our advantage in a more holistic thinking around programme design and

assessment then I think we're missing opportunities there. So I think a lot of those big themes would play in the direction of thinking a bit more holistically than we have done yeah (P16).

Participant 09 felt that PASS worked in concert with a range of external initiatives:

Some of this is quite early days for us but I think there are a number of things happening in parallel at the moment like the move towards a programme approach, like the feedback for learning campaign, like the work that some of us are doing around the [QAA Scotland's] current Scottish enhancement theme, that are making this a really good time to bring all of this together. And I think a lot of what the PASS project's done is provide really quite a valuable lens for all those discussions (P09).

Recommendations

It is important to consider how PFA may fit in with current institutional or external agendas. By strategically aligning with agendas to which the programme or institution has committed, it may be possible to garner resources or support for PFA.

Resources (time, space, money and evidence)

Notably, resources were mentioned explicitly by only six of the interviewees. None of the interviewees spoke about resources as a major barrier to embedding PFA. The lack of resources was spoken about in a general way. One interviewee explained,

If someone has committed to making quite a significant change to their assessment experience across three years or their programme focused assessment, then they need some support. If they're just expected to do it I think it will have a limited impact, if they're supported and given space, time and resource to make the changes to the sufficient standard then the changes will happen much more effectively I think. So there's lots of barriers to entry but I think the main one that staff across the sector seem to be reporting is the squeezing of time and resource to a point where they literally have to just keep their head down and keep going and therefore the space and time to reflect, as we would expect our students, kind of gets lost. And you also lose that community practice, the more you've got your head down doing your work the less you're talking to your colleagues and they're some of the most clear correlates with good practice, shared practice and collaborative enhancement of teaching. (P04)

Another interviewee described:

You have to work within a system to get people thinking and assessing at the programme level, and that usually means they have to do additional things on top of what they would normally do. So it costs extra resource, and we have in effect to run a parallel system. (P12)

Interviews suggested that one of the most valuable resources for embedding PFA is evidence. Many interviewees mentioned the need for evidence from other institutions or programmes that are further along in the process when attempting to embed PFA. Several respondents reported drawing on case studies on the PASS website and those mentioned at workshops.

It's really useful to have the case studies to be able to say, "Well look what [Russell group university] did" or "here's an institution that's not dissimilar to ours and they did something and it was demonstrated to be a really effective way and students liked it". (P03)

Most universities have a modular approach to assessment and I think that from what I've seen, there is a bit of resistance to letting that go, so I think it's too early to say whether there will be a change. What would really effect change I think would be a good example of where it's been done, what the benefits were, and if there are some real, tangible benefits in terms of retention, students doing better than might have been expected… yeah evidence of those particular cohorts of students then going on to do good things, getting powerful positions, that kind of thing. So I think for it to be successful I think there needs to be some evidence of programme focussed assessment being something that we can implement and it giving something over and above the standard approaches to assessment. So I think that's crucial for it. (P06)

Recommendations

As embedding PFA may take additional resources, particularly in terms of staff time, the programme team should consider how this extra time can be found in any discussion about embedding PFA. In terms of evidence, interviewees recommended that anyone implementing PFA should ask for help from experts (P10, P16). Several recommendations were made to book a PASS workshop (P04, P15), but there is no dedicated funding to support these beyond July 2013. This further indicates the importance of ensuring that case study materials continue to be available on the PASS website. Internal pilot schemes offer another way to work out 'growing pains' while also providing home-grown evidence for the introduction of PFA.

Summary

Interviewees recommended that programme teams wishing to implement PFA take regulations and staff buy-in very seriously, as these are the two major barriers to implementing PFA (in addition to the modular programme structures). To overcome these two barriers, anyone working to embed PFA needs to build relationships with their institutional QA body, senior management, and the programme team. As participant 01 said, "it's an idea which when you put it to a group of enthusiastic educators in any context, they just get it" (P01). Therefore, getting support a matter of figuring out what is possible from the QA perspective, what staff need to feel comfortable with the changes, and what resources or allowances senior management is able to offer. Getting everyone's support can be facilitated by timing changes to coincide with new programmes or validations, or by strategically aligning with institutional or external agenda. The PASS resources may also be useful as evidence supporting PFA as a realistic possibility. Getting students on board is a matter of really understanding why you are introducing PFA, and crafting a narrative that helps students to help make the relevant connections.

Conclusion

The evaluation has suggested that the PASS initiatives have had an impact on both specific course developments and the more general development of thinking on assessment approaches by academics across UK HE.

This impact has resulted from individuals who have been involved in the project continuing to act as advocates, from ideas being disseminated in staff development courses and by external examiners, and from staff using and disseminating the online case studies. While our sample probably favoured the most engaged workshop attendees, the interviews did demonstrate that even outside the PASS group and case study programme leaders there is a group of people for whom implementing PFA is an immediate goal. There were, generally, more positive effects than expected, with a core group interested and moving to embed PFA in their programmes.

Whether or not the PASS name is specifically remembered, the project has contributed to the gradual 'seeping' of PFA ideas. PFA ideas were familiar to the ten PVCs/ILLTs/QA and QAA representatives we interviewed. The growing interest in PFA has been fostered by the multiple other initiatives, projects and agendas supporting programme-based thinking, including the employability agenda, TESTA, and the ASKe Assessment Standards Manifesto. Many see PFA not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to accomplish other goals, such as employability or reducing the assessment burden.

Interviews revealed that factors that influence the success or failure of PFA include programme structure, regulations, staff buy-in and senior management support, student expectations, timing, internal and external agendas such as employability, and resources (including evidence). The evaluation brought to light several conflicts, such as the tensions between bottom-up and top-down approaches, and raised questions about the role and flexibility of QA regulations.

Key recommendations

- Those wishing to embed PFA should ensure that their QA processes, procedures, templates, regulations, and validation arrangements reflect this goal. Programme development teams, pedagogic leaders etc., should partner with their institutional QA body to support embedding of PFA. *See the 'Regulations' section of the 'Barriers and Success Factors to Embedding PFA' section of this report for more detailed recommendations.*

- The QAA should consider being more explicit in its documentation about expecting to see programme assessment.

- HEA cluster and disciplinary leads should continue to bring PASS resources to the attention of institutions and individual staff.

- Senior management wishing to embed PFA should ensure that evaluation and promotion structures also reflect this goal. Also, in particular, they should be mindful of the unintended innovation-stifling and knock-on effect of the NSS whereby programmes or individual members of staff do not dare to be innovative as this may impact on NSS results. *See the 'Staff-Buy-In' section of the 'Barriers and Success Factors to Embedding PFA' section of this report for more detailed recommendations.*

- The HEA should ensure the PASS website remains accessible and link it to other projects that are theoretically and practically compatible with PASS. *See the 'Recommendations to the HEA' section of this report for more detailed recommendations.*