Interpreting Programme-Focused Assessment for the Validation of Programmes

Report of one university's experience

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1   Background

Assessment practices are largely discussed and performed within module constraints and strategies to design and implement programme-focused assessment are currently under-developed. The aim of the PASS project is to provide insight into how to design an 'effective, efficient, inclusive and sustainable assessment strategy which delivers the key course/programme outcomes'. Amongst other benefits, this is seen to have crucial impact on developing learning, ensuring retention and enhancing students' employability (see Hudson 2010, PASS Literature Review).

This report is concerned with an institution wide drive to develop programme focused assessment. Programmes across the post 1992 university were directed to take a programme-wide view of learning with respect to student assessment, and were offered guidance to assess programme learning outcomes (PLOs) across the programme. This report examines the interpretation and use of programme-focused assessment instructions within module constraints by looking at programme validation documents sampled from various departments across all faculties within the university. It draws conclusions about the effectiveness of broad instructions in achieving programme-focused assessment. Programme-focused assessment (PFA) is 'specifically designed to address major programme outcomes rather than very specific or isolated components of the course' (PASS Position Paper, p.3).

2   Methods

The report is based on an analysis of a selection of programme validation documents from across faculties within the university. In total, we sampled validation documents for 15 undergraduate programmes distributed across the 4 faculties within the university (for a breakdown, see Appendix 1). The programmes analysed were developed as part of a university-wide initiative to redesign the academic offering of the university. These programmes are now being realised in practice and undergoing more detailed development in their implementation. However, evaluation of that implementation does not form part of this report. The analysis presented here seeks to identify different types and interpretations of PFA, and the extent to which and the ways in which PFA has been planned at programme level. Specifically, we looked for evidence of how different assessment

strategies, policies and practices may reflect consistency and integration (of skills and/or knowledge) across the whole programme or sections of the respective programme beyond module level.

3   Findings

The analysis of programme validation documents shows an explicit awareness of, and concern with, the PFA initiative supported by the university. Furthermore, two main findings emerge: (1) the interpretation of the PFA initiative varies across the programmes; and (2) the varied interpretations are reflected in different attempts to address PFA rather than the articulation of detailed and coherent strategies to implement it and assess students' progress across modules. Overall, it was programmes from the Faculty of Business that recorded more clearly defined assessment strategies and guidance, and we will therefore provide more examples from programmes within this faculty (see Appendix 2 for a sample strategy). In what follows, we offer more details on the main findings. We discuss in turn specific strategies and general guidance to address PFA.

3.1   Specific strategies

The most common strategy to reflect PFA in validation documents is the inclusion of different forms of *assessment mapping*. Assessment mapping differs in content across programmes. Most often, programme validation documents illustrate in a table or chart format which modules address particular programme learning outcomes. However, the visual representation of how module learning outcomes (MLOs) and programme learning outcomes (PLOs) are aligned is not usually accompanied by very detailed assessment strategies; it rather constitutes a preliminary step towards developing mechanisms to integrate students' learning across modules and help them to see the coherence of the programme. In other cases, PLOs are linked with the types of assessment that are thought to be most suitable (e.g. examination or coursework) and assessment maps may chart the different types of assessment and their weighting for every module in the programme in order to show that issues of suitability, balance and variety have been considered.

A strategy that addresses PFA more directly refers to the introduction of *key themes/strands* in the programme and *modules* that integrate learning outcomes and previous skills acquired across the programme although not always explicitly linked to modes of assessment. An example of strands that run through the programme and 'establish coherence and progression' is provided, for example, by the *English Language and Communication* programme, where 'language description' and 'intercultural communication' amongst others are identified as 'strands' that are followed through in different modules. Furthermore, an example that addresses assessment planning is provided by the *Occupational Therapy* programme, which aims to ensure 'developmental progression of assessments' within the 'linear themes' of the programme (e.g. clinical reasoning, basic sciences, occupational science, evidence based practice). In the *Economics, Finance and International Business* programme, in response to the diversity of assessment tasks, five 'overall themes' were also agreed on and module leaders were encouraged to relate their assessment tasks (through assessment criteria) to these themes, in order to enable students to see progression from one task to another and feed forward the guidance received.

Some programmes identify modules that aim to integrate learning. These vary in form, position in the programme and may refer to the integration of knowledge or skills, or to students' general development. We thus find evidence of the introduction of 'synoptic' activities and 'capstone'

modules; skills modules; dissertation modules; PDP or PPD modules; assessment literacy modules; and work/industrial placements, depending on the nature of the programme. For example, the assessment strategy outlined in the validation document for the *International Hospitality Management*, *International Tourism Management* and *International Hospitality and Tourism Management* programmes specifically incorporates 'capstone' modules, meant to bring together theories and concepts studied in core modules at earlier levels, synthesise solutions to problems and demonstrate higher-order cognitive skills. It also includes synoptic and reflective activities, as well as PPD and PDP modules, meant to ensure 'progressive development'. Skill progression, for instance, is reflected in the fact that 'students will be required to undertake an evaluation of their competencies in Level 4 (PPD), will develop case study scenarios from their SWE [student work experience] year [...] and will use these case scenarios (LPD module) to mentor first-year students in preparation for their work placement'. The *Economics, Finance and International Business* programme also includes, amongst others, a synoptic module based on an in-company project drawing together the various 'strands of the programme' and providing the basis for 'further development of reflective skills'. A particular way of assessing students' overall progression and learning over a semester or year is further illustrated by 'portfolio' assignments, as found in the *Architecture* programme.

Furthermore, several programmes have incorporated specific strategies related to *group work assessment*, in an attempt to ensure consistent and fair practices across modules. The Business School in particular adopted a group work policy (implemented in 2009/2010), which included guidelines for group size, group selection and composition (dependent on the duration of the group work), as well as principles for identifying differential contributions. The overall goal of this policy was to reduce cases where a single mark was allocated to all members of a group based on the assessment of a product (e.g. report, essay), whilst maintaining, or even enhancing, formative group-based learning including the assessment of teamwork skills. Programmes such as *Business and Marketing Management* or *Economics, Politics and International Relations, Economics, Finance and International Business* for example subscribe to this group work policy implemented in the School.

3.2   General guidance

Apart from these concrete strategies to address PFA, programme validation documents also make reference to, and provide (usually general) guidance on various aspects of assessment. First of all, we note recommendations regarding the design and organisation of assessment to ensure efficiency and consistency across programmes. This can entail an expressed commitment to ensuring a *balance (and variety) of assessment methods*; the efficient *distribution of workload* in order to avoid bunching at particular points in the semester; and references to *assessment-related policies and documents providing research based guidance.*   In some programmes, orientation towards PFA includes provisions for staff meetings to discuss how assessment variety can be achieved and to agree on overall 'themes' to be addressed by module leaders to help students see progress from one task to another (e.g. *Economics, Finance and International Business*). Other programmes introduce mechanisms to monitor the programme assessment strategy (e.g. through student feedback, annual surveys) (*International Hospitality Management*). Although useful, such measures and guidelines are not uniform across the programmes and tend to remain general in nature, constituting initial steps to address PFA rather than evidence of a rigorous and consistent approach to implement it successfully.

4   Conclusion

This report has examined how programme validation documents developed at a post 1992 university interpret and implement PFA. Overall, we find that PFA has been interpreted in variable ways across the programmes, and that the ways to address PFA identified in programme validation documents cannot be easily categorised in terms of the notion of PFA informing the PASS project. PFA is understood to reflect (in substantial ways) integration of learning outcomes at semester level, annual level or in final heavily weighted integrative assessment (see Appendix 3). We did not find substantial evidence for consistent strategies to show *how* exactly students are assessed across modules. The programme validation documents we examined usually contain statements and elements that set the stage for and indicate *progression* towards PFA but fail to incorporate significant evidence of how PFA is achieved in *practice*. Nevertheless, some important steps towards recognising and implementing PFA have been taken, and these are most visible in the introduction of measures such as 'integrative' modules, general 'strands' running through the programme and the adoption of assessment related policies to ensure consistency and efficiency across the programme.

The analysis of programme validation documents draws attention to the persistence of two main problems related to PFA (see PASS 'Assessment issues' paper, http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/wp3issues.pdf: (1) the difficulty to 'integrate and assess complex, higher-order learning'; and (2) the risk that students and staff may fail to detect the links within, and coherence of, the programme. Undoubtedly programme validation documents cannot (for space if not other reasons) cover the assessment strategy in much detail. But they do provide relevant insight into how PFA has been understood in different programmes, and the range (or absence) of measures taken to address its implementation. The overall approach to PFA at this particular university reflected in programme validation documents tends to remain insufficiently developed and more concerted efforts are needed to reach a coherent interpretation and solid implementation strategy of PFA. It suggests that there is a need to go beyond mere exhortation of PFA in order to bring about a significant shift from a module to a programme focus on assessment. Greater guidance (such as the resources provided by the PASS project) for programme teams in developing strategies and approaches to PFA will help them shape PFA to suit their context.

Appendix

Appendix 1 List of programmes sampled

1. *Faculty of Technology, Design and Environment*
   - BA (Hons) Architecture
   - BA (Hons) Construction Project Management
   - BA (Hons) City and Regional Planning
   - BSc (Hons) Motorsport Technology
   - BSc (Hons) Computer Aided Mechanical Engineering
2. *Faculty of Business*
   - BA (Hons) Business and Marketing Management
   - BSc (Hons) Economics, Finance and   International Business
   - BA (Hons) Economics, Politics and International Relations
   - BSc (Hons) International Hospitality Management
   - BSc (Hons) International Tourism Management
   - BSc (Hons) International Hospitality and Tourism Management
3. *Faculty of Health and Life Sciences*
   - BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy
   - BSc (Hons) Physiotherapy
4. *Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences*
   - BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies
   - BA (Hons) English Language and Communication

Appendix 2 Example of a programme assessment strategy

The programme's overarching aim is to use assessment to both measure student achievement and to promote student learning and engagement. Within this broad aim, the programme seeks to implement a programme-focused assessment strategy to achieve four main objectives:

1. Firstly, the reduction of assessment pressure points and consequent stress on both staff and students.
2. Secondly, to enhance student engagement and ability to make informed judgements on their own work
3. Thirdly, to enhance student progression and achievement of programme learning outcomes through the provision of effective feedback and feedforward.
4. Finally, through diligent adherence to the robust quality assurance policies and procedures of the School and University and critical self-evaluation of the Programme's learning, teaching and assessment processes ensure (within pragmatic limits) the assessment of student learning is both valid and reliable and does not unfairly disadvantage any student.

These objectives are met through:

1. <u>Reduction of assessment pressure points</u>

    a) *An assessment schedule*

    The attached programme assessment schedule shows the weighting, type and scheduling of assessment across all compulsory modules along with electives 'owned' by the home department. Also shown is the timing of the return of formal written feedback on all summative assessment. The assessment schedule is appended (appendix 1) to this strategy and will be made available to students on the Business Programme VLE and in the Student Programme Guide and will be kept up to date on a yearly basis. It is the intention of the programme to use this schedule to reduce assessment pinch points and to allow students further information to underpin their module choices. Student Module Guides explicitly detail assessment criteria, regulations and deadlines and feedback methods and timing for all summative assessment in a module. To reduce 'drift' any changes to this assessment schedule must be approved by the relevant Programme Director before implementation.

    b) *Constructive alignment of the programme*

    Appendix 2 maps module learning outcomes of compulsory modules onto the programme outcomes to ensure coverage and alignment. At module level, all module descriptions detail which learning outcomes are being assessed by which assessment tasks and the overall number of student learning hours expected to effect the successful completion of the module's summative assessment.

2. <u>Enhancing students' self-evaluative ability based on enhanced understanding of 'quality' in terms of their assessed work</u>

    The programme considers the development of students' abilities to make informed judgements on the quality of their own work and of others to be an indispensible condition for academic success and a key professional skill that underpins effective learning (Sadler, 2008).   To this effect the programme will ensure:

    a) Clear assessment criteria are provided for all summative assessments, and where appropriate, formative assessments. Criteria for summative assessments are made explicit in Student Module Guides.
    b) Student understanding of the characteristics and standards embodied in a 'good assignment' will be enhanced in Level 4 through marking practice and discussion of exemplar assignments in the module 'International Business Context'. Later in Level 5 in the second semester students will be required to participate in the peer review of drafts in 'Research Methods'. Examples of 'A grade' assignments will be used to transfer understandings of quality in many Level 5 modules including 'Research Methods' and 'Business Strategy for Competitive Advantage'.
    c) Student's ability to evaluate their own work in terms of avoiding plagiarism will take place in their first semester in 'Introduction to Management' where students will be introduced to referencing requirements and gain formative experience in the use of Turnitin software.

Subsequently, Turnitin will be used in the 'Research Methods' module in Level 5 and in the 'Business Synoptic' in Level 6 and in all dissertations.

d) Early diagnostic assessment will be used at Level 4 in 'Analytical Techniques for Business and Management' to evaluate students numeric abilities and in Foundations of Business for writing skills. Subsequent to such diagnostic assessment where students require further tuition and practice they will be directed to extra language and writing classes run by [the university] International and Upgrade.

3.   Enhancing student learning and engagement through assessment and feedback

The programme views assessment as central to the curriculum and regards assessment as integral to learning design and seeks to support student learning through assessment and feedback, methods include:

(a) Early assessment

Early formative assessment and feedback is used within the programme at Level 4 to engender good study habits and engagement early on and detect potential failure in time for effective remediation. 'Introduction to Management' will have an early 'poster' activity, 'Foundations of Business' a short writing task, 'Analytical Techniques for Business and Management' an early diagnostic assessment focused on numeracy skills.

(b) Staged assessment

Staged assessment frameworks at Level 4 will provide clear structures to enable students to take responsibility for time management and prioritisation right from the start of their studies, such as the staged collaborative project in 'Managing in a Diverse Global Environment'.

(c) Feedforward

The concept and practice of 'feedforward' will be embedded in the programme through the enhanced use of formative feedback throughout the programme. In Level 4 this will be enhanced through the use of a student 'Feedforward Proforma' (Race, 2007) as part of a more proactive first year personal tutoring system (Business School Personal Tutoring Plan). Students will be encouraged to continue with the 'Feedforward Proforma' throughout their degree to underpin a compulsory reflective statement in the Level 6 compulsory Business Synoptic.

(d) Dialogic Feedback

Evidence-based strategies that promote the active engagement of students with their feedback through facilitated dialogue and discussion will be embedded in the programme. Pending the successful conclusion of a School-wide pilot project in oral feedback in 09/10, the programme anticipates including 15 minute oral feedback sessions at pivotal points in Levels 4 and 5. It is anticipated that these would take place in 'Introduction to Management' and 'International Business Context' in Level 4 and 'International Markets and Competition' in Level 5.

(e)   Synoptic Reflection

An assessed synoptic reflection in the Level 6 'Business Synoptic' will underpin students' reflection on their learning achievements and future goals.
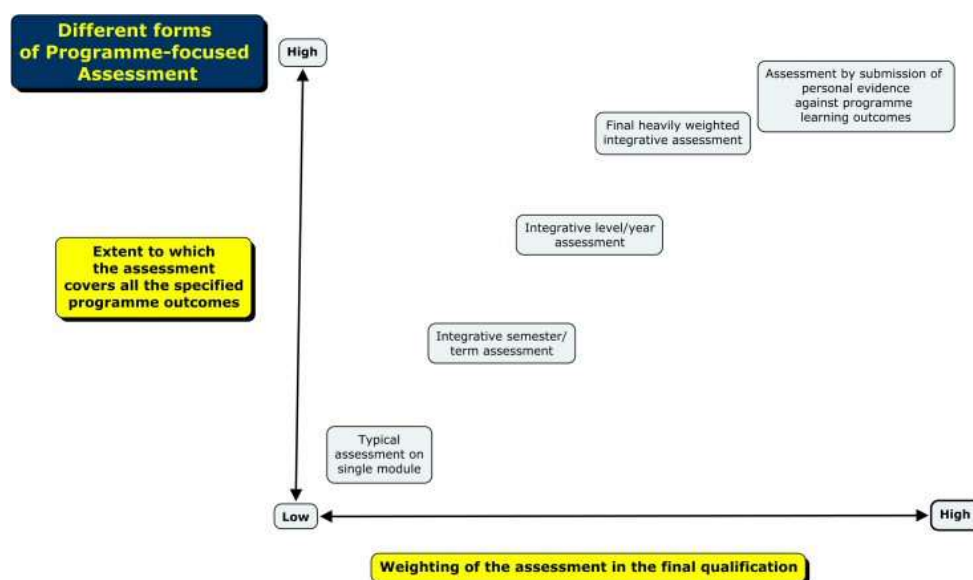
4.   Assessing students fairly

The programme will seek to ensure that assessment fairly measures student achievement through:

a)   Diligent adherence to School and University assessment and moderation quality assurance policies and procedures.
b)   Ensuring that a range of assessment methods are used throughout the programme, not only to support the development of a variety of skills and knowledge areas but also to support students' different learning styles, abilities. That said, the Programme will emphasise and replicate assessment tasks and methods focused on the key 'slowly learnt' academic literacies of the programme. These include evidence-based argumentation and question deconstruction and, in addition, repetitive practice in the predominant rhetorical structure of business, the business report.

All students will receive groupwork training (Level 4 - Managing in a Diverse Global Environment). In addition, groupwork in all compulsory modules where the *outcome* of groupwork (rather than *process*) is assessed will be structured to ensure the inclusion of robust processes for dealing with group dysfunction and that the marks awarded for collaborative outcomes (where there are no re-allocation procedures) are normally below 20%.

Appendix 3 Types of programme-focused assessment

Source: http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/definitions.php