Programme Focused Assessment

A short guide

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1   Introduction

This guide is for anyone who plays a part in designing, developing and delivering modules and programmes in HE. It is relevant to academic staff and others who teach; quality managers and administrators; and students who undertake roles such as being programme representatives.

The Guide has been developed by the PASS Project, a collaborative group of staff from six universities who have identified the need for Programme Focused Assessment (PFA) and collated a range of ways of implementing PFA within and beyond their own universities. The project was funded by the National Teaching Fellowship scheme.

2   What is PFA?

By 'programme' we mean a course of study such as a Bachelor's or Master's degree. Elements within programmes may be called modules, units, components or even courses. In this guide we use the term 'modules'.

PFA is assessment of student learning specifically designed to address key programme learning outcomes. Are you certain that you effectively assess all of the programme learning outcomes that you have specified?

PFA shifts the balance away from assessment at the module, unit or component level which is where much attention and effort is currently focused. When designing and delivering assessment do you operate mainly at the module level?

PFA is integrative in nature, assessing the knowledge, understanding and skills that represent key programme aims.   Do your students experience their programme as a whole or do they see it as 'ticking off' modules and the marks attained?

3   Why do you and your students need PFA?

A number of reasons for the current interest in PFA have been identified. It is likely that some of the following apply to your programmes.

3.1   Module focused assessment

- Conventionally every module is assessed separately leading to assessment overload or 'over-assessment'. For staff this means an overload of marking, data management and quality

assurance procedures. For students this means an overload of work on assignments or preparation for exams, leaving little time for broader study activities.

- Institutions tend to mandate standard procedures for module assessment which may not allow tutors to use a more appropriate range of assessment techniques for their subject area.

- The assessment methods that can be used in single, short modules are limited. For example, research-based tasks or collaborative group tasks may require longer than one module to complete and report upon. This means that module assessment methods may be restricted with an emphasis on knowledge testing focused on specific module content.

- Many types of formative assessment, such as feedback on drafts and practice tasks, are difficult to encompass within single modules

3.2   The development of graduate skills and knowledge and 'slow learning'

- It is difficult to be sure that programme learning outcomes, which represent what a graduate leaving the programme should be able to do, are all addressed, at appropriate levels, on a module by module basis.

- Modules are too short to enable students' development and improvement over time to be assessed. Some valuable learning, including attainments that are identified in programme learning outcomes, can only be assessed after a lengthier period of time. This has been called 'slow learning' (Knight & Yorke, 2003[1])

- Programme learning outcomes frequently focus on such slowly-developed, complex, and high order skills, knowledge and understanding.

- Thinking across modules could help both students and the staff supporting them, to identify progress in meaningful ways, potentially linking to Personal Development Planning. This would help to prepare students for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) processes after graduation.

3.3   Student learning

- Students tend to deal with each module separately as it comes. In fact students often deliberately avoid making links between modules when they do assessment. They fear that they might confuse what is needed in a specific exam or assignment, if they draw on other modules.

- Students fail to see the links between modules and the coherence of the programme and are not necessarily supported by staff to do so. Some staff focus solely on their direct responsibilities at module level.

- Students frequently view module assessment as a series of tasks and concentrate on managing the process and accumulating marks. This 'tick-box' mentality, focused on marks, is not likely to produce high quality learning or a deep approach. Many students adopt a surface approach to learning or a solely strategic approach.

- Routine assessment is often seen by students as a series of hurdles to jump with no meaning other than producing marks. Restricted opportunity to engage in more complex and meaningful assessment discourages students from taking responsibility for their own learning through assessment.

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[1] : Knight, P. T. & Yorke, M. (2003) Assessment, learning and employability. Maidenhead, Open University Press

4   How can PFA be put into practice?

PFA can be implemented at various levels depending on what proportion of the programme learning outcomes are covered in the assessment and the weighting of the marks given for PFA in the composition of the overall marks student receive in a component, level or programme. The diagram below illustrates the spectrum of PFA approaches that have been identified.
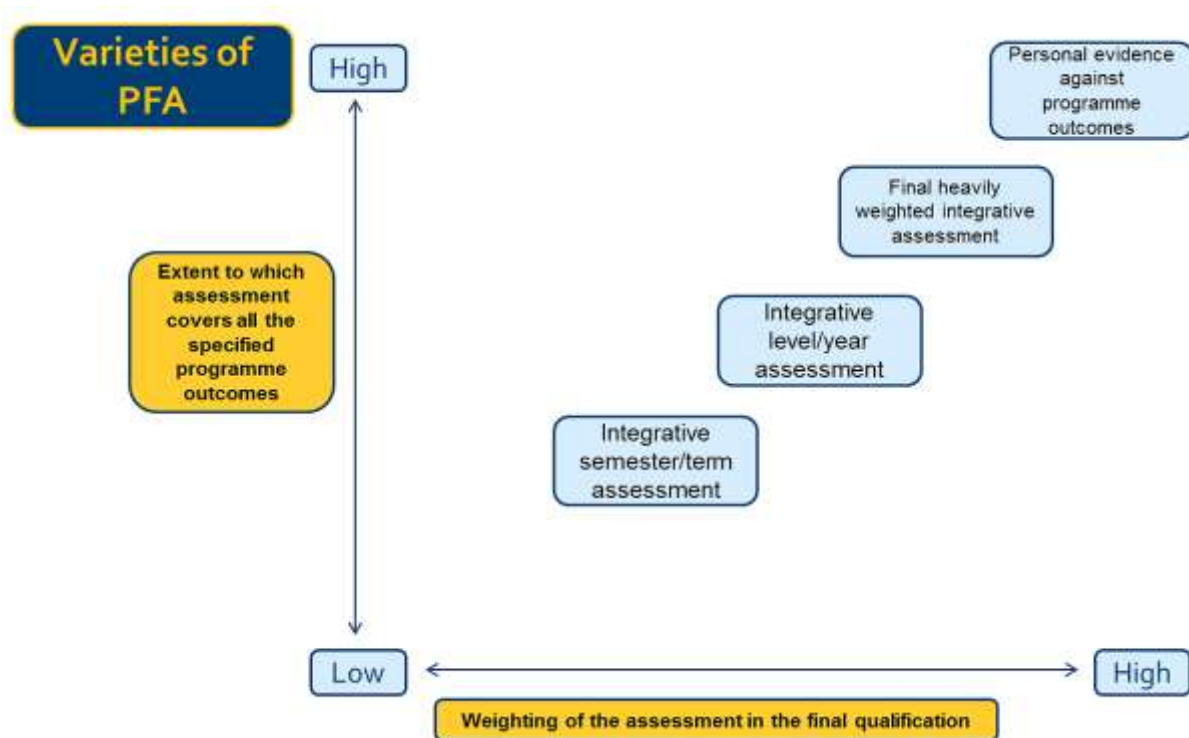

Figure 1 - Varieties of Programme Focused Assessment

The most frequent approach to PFA found by the project and reported in case studies is the use of horizontal integrative assessment across one or more stages/years of the programme, as in the example below. The second example illustrates the use of vertical integration.

Example: Horizontal integrative assessment across one or more stages of the programme. The Peninsular Medical School, UK, assesses student attainment at each stage of the programme, though 'assessment modules' which are credit bearing. In order to undertake this assessment, students draw on knowledge and learning from all components of that stage of the programme thus integrating the knowledge, understanding and skills for the stage. Three main assessment methods are used to ensure coverage of intended learning outcomes. They are: knowledge tests, clinical skills assessment and PDP portfolios for professional and personal development. All assessment is based on the programme learning outcomes.

Example: Vertical integrative assessment across one or more stages of the programme.   The Foundation Degree in Leadership and Management in the Air Travel Industry at Exeter University and Exeter College uses this approach. Within the suite of modules on this work-based programme, there are two year-long modules, acting as the spine for the academic process, one in each year of study. They represent 50% of the overall credits and have been designed to capture learning addressing the programme learning outcomes as students move through the programme. They are

assessed by means of a Professional Practice Portfolio and are the main way of integrating learning across programme stages. Two Business Improvement Project modules also run year long in each year and further support integration of learning from all academic components and also from work-based learning. The Portfolio is built up over the programme and contains elements which capture the student's engagement with learning and reflections upon personal and professional development.

For more examples see the Case Studies section of the PASS web site: http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk

5   What you should consider if you want to implement PFA

- Many implementations of PFA do not cover the whole programme at all stages. If the approach to PFA is new to the programme team and new within their department or university, it might be better to start small, with PFA at one level or within a few programme components.
- Launching a new programme or making major revisions to an established programme may offer a good opportunity to introduce a substantial implementation of PFA and it would be a pity to miss the opportunity.

5.1   Considering the programme team

- You may be able to reduce the assessment workload for at least some staff. In some cases the workload overall may be similar – but staff may be doing more productive work, such as providing feedback, or the workload may be distributed differently.
- There will need to be a shift in perspective from module level to programme level. This is not just in the design of assessment. There will be a need to generate a programme team ethos amongst staff.
- All relevant staff need to be involved in the overall planning and design process for PFA not only involved when they are asked to implement it.
- Change can be slow in universities. In some circumstances you may be able to push things faster than normal but often you have to be patient.

5.2   Institution and Quality Assurance (QA)

- Any significantly new way of operating should be discussed at an early stage within the department and institution. There may be particular concerns about QA procedures and whether your PFA approaches fit with standardised assessment and modular regulations. Bear in mind that many programme teams *have* been able to introduce PFA by making a good case. This should be followed up with ongoing involvement of staff with responsibilities for teaching & learning quality and with relevant committees throughout the development and implementation of PFA.
- You should be able to make the case that you are introducing more robust assessment and that there are benefits in quality assurance terms. You will be developing more explicit assessment for programme level outcomes and you may have specific assessors managing and marking the process. This is more reliable than all staff being expected to assess Programme learning outcomes within their modules. At formative and interim stages you

are likely to involve more people in assessment including staff and students. This is another way in which you will be improving the accuracy of marking.

- A number of universities are introducing the concept and practice of 'assessment modules' which have a 'level' and a 'size' (ie a number of credits). This seems to be a useful way of facilitating PFA in the context of UK approaches to assessment management and QA. See the example below from Brunel University.

- If your programme is regulated by a professional or statutory body you may be concerned that this will limit the scope for implementation of PFA. However such bodies are keen to be sure that programme learning outcomes are attained. Some examples given here are from programmes regulated by external bodies such as the Peninsular Medical School. Pharmacy programmes at University of Bradford are in process of implementing PFA. As for other stakeholders, you need to make sure that you involve relevant professional bodies from the beginning and they may then become strong supporters of PFA.

5.3   Considering students

- Students need to be involved and they need to understand PFA. Students who encounter PFA from the beginning of their programme seem to have little difficulty in understanding the approach. However it may be more difficult and, perhaps, controversial amongst students who are being asked to adapt to considerable change in assessment during their programme. PFA makes it more likely that students will demonstrate more positive approaches to learning but this will not follow automatically and students do need to be consulted and given advice and guidance.

- If you want students to take more responsibility and be more self-directed it is particularly important to help your students to develop assessment literacy. Bear in mind that you may want to collaborate with students in self and peer assessment particularly where personal and professional skills are involved.

- The wider range of assessment methods that may be used are a benefit to students. For example, portfolio approaches have been shown in many contexts to be an effective method for assessing broad outcomes such as disciplinary or professional skills and the integration of knowledge. Portfolio assessment helps to prepare students better for professional work and employment beyond graduation.

- PFA can blur the boundaries between formative and summative assessment. One example is the use of progress tests. Another is the potential to use the space that is opened up in the classroom when there is less focus on immediate summative assessment, for integral formative assessment. This type of formative assessment is based on discussion, guidance and feedback as part of activity in the lecture hall, seminar room or workshop, engaging staff and students in ongoing learning discussions.

6   Examples of PFA

Example: Horizontal integrative assessment based around an authentic project, Coventry University Business School, Undergraduate programmes. Several full-time undergraduate programmes are implementing PFA. The strategy includes three modules in each year which are assessed together. PFA has given the programme team the space to assess students in a more meaningful way based on a realistic industry case study (e.g. Cadbury's/Kraft, Jaguar, Barclays).

Students work in groups and 50% of their assessment in each of the three modules is on a group basis. Other assessment is carried out on an individual basis with various kinds of knowledge test focusing on module content.

Example: Integration through the separation of assessment blocks and study blocks. Brunel University, Undergraduate programmes. The institutional regulations were changed to encourage the use of study blocks with no summative assessment but an emphasis on formative assessment and assessment blocks where summative assessment addressing more than one module takes place. 'Normal' modules are still allowed where an assessment block is coterminous with a study block. Each level of the undergraduate course must include 120 study credits and 120 assessment credits where study credits are a measure of expected student study and learning time and assessment credits reflect the complexity, scope and importance of what is being assessed. Assessment blocks collectively assess all learning outcomes.

Different programmes have implemented different assessment practices. For example, BioSciences use study and assessment blocks in all 3 years, with a synoptic exam in each year. In contrast, Mathematics use separate study and assessment blocks in Years 1 and 2 and revert to a conventional modular structure in Year 3 which is built around options. The Mathematics department has found that students are less likely to compartmentalise their learning and students say that the assessment blocks bring together their learning from the various study blocks. Staff report that students are better at 'carrying over' learning from year one to year two. There has been some saving in staff time spent on assessment with a rebalancing towards supporting student learning and formative assessment.

Find more on Programme Focused Assessment at the PASS web site:

http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/

Case Studies, Resources, Workshop Materials, References, Definitions, Conferences, Reports, Links, Related Projects

Email: pass@bradford.ac.uk

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