



Programme Assessment Strategies  
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# The case for Programme Focused Assessment

PASS Position Paper

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# *PASS Position Paper: the case for Programme Focused Assessment*

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## **1 Introduction**

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This paper argues that Programme-Focused Assessment (PFA) should be considered for adoption/adaptation by *all* courses and programmes in HE that wish to improve their assessment processes and make assessment more ‘meaningful’ for their students. From both theoretical and practical perspectives, the PASS project has demonstrated that principles and techniques of PFA can both improve the quality of the student learning experience and resolve many of the problems which are currently associated with assessment in HE.

After brief discussion of current assessment issues in relation to PFA, this paper will:

- explain what we mean by PFA;
- highlight different methods and approaches which reflect the principles of PFA;
- suggest the likely impact of PFA, with specific reference to case studies.

## **2 Current assessment issues**

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The PASS project was set up to directly confront issues which concern every course/programme leader in HE: how to design and deliver an effective, efficient and sustainable assessment strategy which ensures that the main course/programme outcomes are satisfied. PFA provides a framework for such effective strategies. The emphasis in PFA on integrative assessment which relates very directly to the overall programme aims and outcomes can deal with assessment issues at two rather different levels: dealing with specific issues in assessment as currently practised across HE, and supporting course/programme leaders who are responsible for the overall assessment strategy.

### **2.1 Specific issues**

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The suggestion that there are some fundamental issues with assessment in higher education should not come as a surprise to anyone reading this publication. Concerns and dissatisfaction can be found running through the research and development literature on learning and assessment in HE, through the student comments in the NSS, and through conversations on assessment with most academic tutors.

Recognising this context, the PASS project started by producing the Issues paper, available on the project website, noting problems such as students and staff failing to see the links/coherence of the programme; modules being too short to focus and provide feedback on slowly learnt literacies and/or complex learning; and students and staff adopting a ‘tick-box’ mentality, focused on marks, engendering a surface approach to learning.

More recently, the very useful paper from Margaret Price et al (2011) bemoans the lack of “pedagogic, and particularly assessment, literacy” possessed by both academic staff and students. They offer 10 key premises that should inform our assessment decisions. For example, premise 8 suggests that “learning is more effective when students understand the assessment process” (page 485) with obvious implications for the use of assessment criteria and the process of feedback. Comparing approaches to assessment, they suggest that “an incremental approach focused at module/unit level provides an assessment experience that appears really disaggregated to students, whereas a program/course focus enables an overview of assessment tasks and progression.” (page 490) And that overview, coupled with the level of student understanding implied in premise 8 above, is a key component of effective PFA.

## 2.2 Issues confronting programme leaders

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Despite the very significant growth of research into assessment and assessment feedback, there is relatively little evidence which can specifically support programme leaders in their strategic decisions on assessment, as the following examples demonstrate:

- Programme-Based Assessment has been used in a number of US colleges and seems at first sight to be a practical realisation of the QAA’s concept of ‘synoptic assessment’ (as endorsed in their Precept 3). But this method has not been explicitly investigated in the UK alongside other major assessment strategies.
- Most of the development work on assessment in the UK to date has focused on specific examples and thus demonstrates significant change at module or assignment level. However, it is not clear how to generalise from specific examples in order to develop a coherent programme strategy.
- Institutional teaching and learning strategies are now commonplace across UK HE. These strategies vary considerably in their focus and approach and it is not always clear how we can determine their effectiveness. Very few strategies have foregrounded the role of assessment. In many strategies, assessment has been implicit rather than explicit. There is also the difficulty of translating policies from institutional to programme level.
- Too often a programme focus on assessment has not moved beyond assessment schedules and grids of learning outcomes and modules. This is compounded by uncertainties about the nature of an effective programme assessment strategy.
- Useful summaries and manifestos of general principles come from projects and initiatives such as REAP and the two CETLs who became partners in the PASS project (ASKe, and AfL). However, these do not provide a completely consistent picture. For example, there is not a consistent discussion of programme assessment, and again there is the problem of translating global principles into a specific programme strategy.
- Innovation in assessment may have unintended consequences if it does not consider how different students interpret and respond to particular innovation. For example, while formative assessment is regarded as one of the most ‘powerful’ tools in the lecturer’s toolkit, this may be mediated by student strategies (e.g. students viewing a formative

opportunity as a 'safety net'). This is further complicated by different views on student orientations to feedback and different recipes for improvement.

- Modern modular programme structures may have implications for assessment which can undermine particular strategies. For example, the development of slowly learnt aspects of graduateness such as academic literacies are often lost, ignored or are serendipitously acquired within fragmented course structures
- To further complicate their strategic decision-making, programme leaders must also take account of notions of collaborative or group assessment.
- Finally, there are issues of inclusivity in assessment. Does the modular assessment diet advantage or disadvantage a particular sub-group of students? The move to PFA should enable a more creative mix of assessment practice which will improve inclusivity.

### 3 What do we mean by Programme-Focused Assessment (PFA)?

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The PASS project started by using the term "programme-based assessment" to describe our emphasis, as this expression had been used in a number of previous papers and articles. At a number of workshops and seminars, this terminology was challenged on the grounds that surely most assessment has some basis in the course or programme from which it emanates. While this is true in principle, we would argue that the links between a particular piece of assessment and the overall programme outcomes can often be remote or tenuous to the students (and sometimes to the staff as well). Rather than extend this debate, we have adopted the term programme-focused assessment to highlight the focus on programme outcomes.

Key features of what we mean by programme-focused assessment and its potential advantages are summarised in Figure 1 below. The first and most critical point is that the assessment is specifically designed to address major programme outcomes rather than very specific or isolated components of the course. It follows then that such assessment is integrative in nature, trying to bring together understandings of subject and skills in ways which represent key programme aims. As a result, the assessment is likely to be more authentic and meaningful to students, staff and external stakeholders. But we say 'likely' rather than 'certain' as we do not suggest that an integrative assessment automatically becomes more meaningful – the nature of the assessment and the criteria still have to be explained and demonstrated to students (eg by providing exemplars and/or practice assessments), especially to those who have been accustomed to a diet of discrete assessment tasks. And this is not an argument to revert back to the 'crunch' of final examinations from the 'good old days' (as one of our workshop participants elegantly expressed it). A set of unseen final examinations which test discrete subject areas (and where the assessment criteria may be obscure or ambiguous) is not programme-focused assessment. As Figure 1 implies, levels of meaningful integration can be achieved in a number of ways, as illustrated by the examples in the next section.

Figure 1 offers 2 dimensions in which assessments can vary: the extent to which the assessment covers specified programme outcomes; and the weighting of the given assessment towards the final qualification. At the bottom left, the typical assessment on a single module of a modular programme is likely to relate to only a limited number or, more commonly, only indirectly related to the

programme outcomes. It also has only a small weighting in relation to the overall qualification. The assumption is that the accumulation of assessment in discrete modules will cover all the main programme outcomes. This is a dangerous assumption, as students may never have the opportunity to integrate their understanding and skills at sufficient depth to fully satisfy programme outcomes.

As we move towards the top right-hand area of the diagram, we increasingly find forms of assessment which we would describe as programme-focused. The different lengths of the boxes suggest that some types of assessment are likely to have very different weighting in different contexts. For example, the single capstone module may have very different credit weightings in different institutions.

The idea of the single, final integrative assessment may seem rather obvious to many colleagues in disciplines like Fine Art and Design where the 'Final Degree Show' is commonplace. But a Final Show or Exhibition may not fully encompass the notion of PFA if the assessment criteria are not clearly related to the overall programme aims and if these criteria are not fully understood by both students and staff.

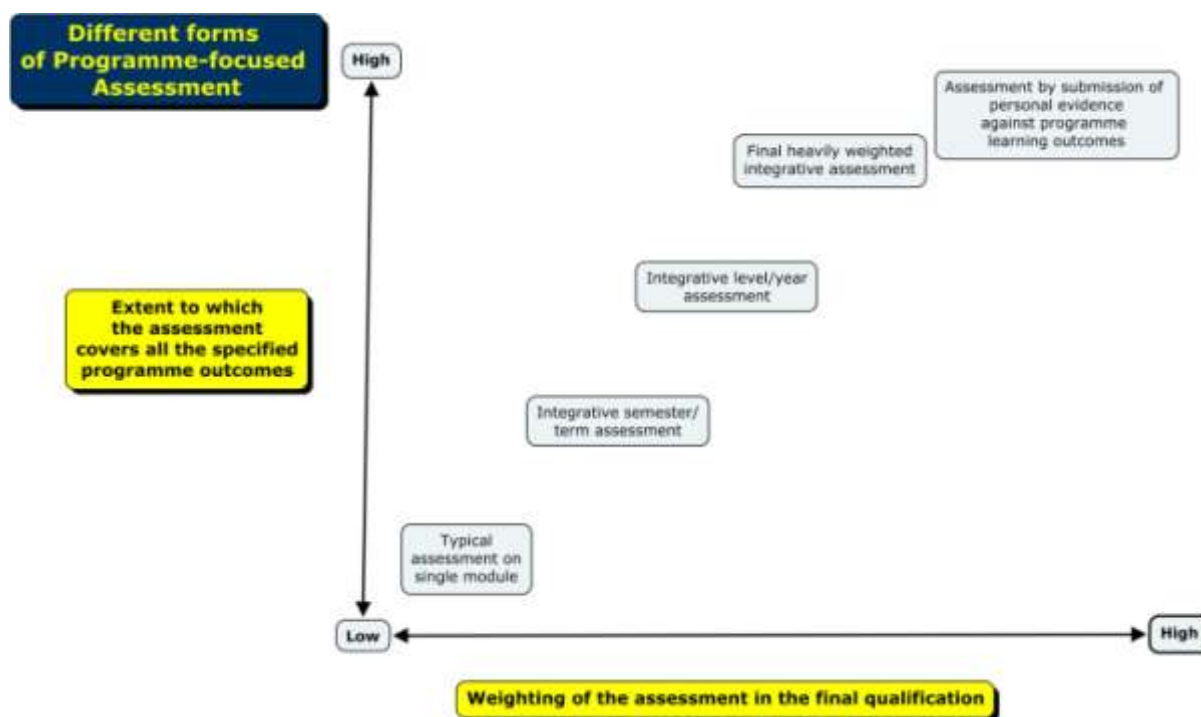


Figure 1 - Different forms of Programme Focused Assessment

#### 4 Examples of PFA in practice

We have recently found a number of institutions who are implementing relevant innovations in assessment which we would see as incorporating elements of PFA although they may not be using the PFA terminology. Further details of the following are available on the PASS website:

## 4.1 The Peninsula Medical School

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This summary is extracted from the full case study report by Sue Rodway-Dyer, University of Exeter (Rodway-Dyer, 2010).

The PMS curriculum has characteristics which differentiate it from other medical schools and facilitates a PFA approach to assessment. Most medical programmes are based upon a 2-year pre-clinical phase where the emphasis is on academic scientific learning, followed by a 3-year clinical phase where learning occurs in (normally) the hospital environment. PMS wanted to break this mould and articulated a 'two-wedges' approach to the 5-year programme (figure 2). In year 1 the scientific learning has the 'thick' end of the wedge but there is clinical learning too, but with only the thin end of a wedge. Over the years, the scientific learning decreases from thick to thin and the clinical learning increases from thin to thick.

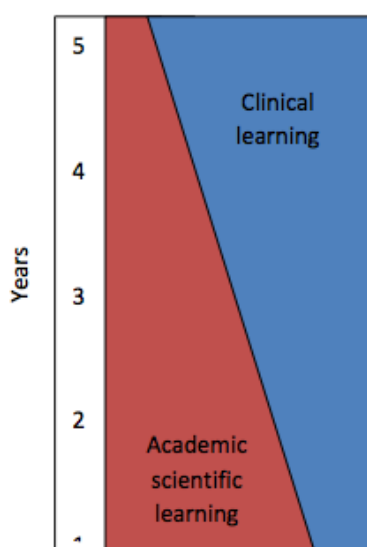


Figure 2 - The PMS approach

The innovative concept behind using programme assessment evolved at PMS due to the initiative of a number of key staff and the engagement of an external consultant from the University of Maastricht, which was the first European HE establishment to adopt programmatic testing. A key driver was the belief in the need for an integrated curriculum with integrated assessment. In all five years the assessment was designed to address the programme level graduate outcomes. It was central to the philosophy of the programme that learning activities could contribute to *any* of the assessment strands. This principle has not changed since the outset.

## 4.2 Biomedical Science at Brunel

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The BSc in Biomedical Sciences (with specialist routes) was revised from the existing course, primarily to resolve 2 major issues: teaching staff were struggling to cope with the assessment workload following significant increase in student numbers; and students were not demonstrating sufficient integration across the different modules. Staff wanted to improve students' critical thinking and analysis and to break down the impression that students were treating modules as 'silos'. Students were also failing to carry over important learning from year to year.



The revised course takes advantage of new assessment regulations at Brunel which allow courses to specify teaching (study blocks) and assessment tasks and activities (assessment blocks) separately so that one assessment block can relate to several study blocks. Courses can also include conventional modules where the study and assessment blocks completely coincide.

Major course elements which represent the ideas of PFA include:

- Assessment blocks relate to one or more study blocks.
- Assessment blocks have different forms depending on the focus of the assessment, e.g. for 2<sup>nd</sup> year practicals, the lab practical sessions are formative and students are given a range of data and have to write a scientific paper for the assessment task.
- Synoptic examination worth 20 credit points at all 3 levels

The revisions to the course have enabled a major reduction in assessment and staff time has been shifted to provide more contact and student support.

### 4.3 Foundation Degree at Exeter College

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The Leadership and Management in the Aviation Industry Foundation Degree (LMAI FDA) has developed a curriculum designed on the assumption that the most authentic pedagogy focuses on the identification, analysis and resolution of immediate problems in the learners' world. This structure and delivery model includes a number of important innovations (e.g. integrated work-based learning, emphasis on 'close learning', variety of distance elements etc.).

Major course elements which represent the ideas and principles of PFA include:

- Use of synoptic problem-based assessment and extended year-long modules.
- Students are required to make ongoing links between taught material and all modules (i.e. a cross-functional business-wide approach) for all formative and summative assignments.
- Ongoing formative feedback and continuous opportunities for critical reflection.

The LMAI FDA was designed to deliver impact for both the employee and the employer. Early-stage indicators suggest that this innovative structure has begun to impact positively upon the working practices of the enrolled managers but also more broadly across the organisation in which they work.

### 4.4 Other developments

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One of our aims over this last year of the project is to find, investigate and disseminate further examples of PFA in practice. For example, we are currently talking to staff at Liverpool Hope University about their new undergraduate regulations which 'abandon modules' and which demand that every course specifies the 'Key Honours Assessment' at Final Year Level.

## 5 What is the impact of PFA?

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Another issue which is a priority in our final year is to investigate impact in the number of innovative case studies which are now emerging – our initial attempt to chart the key features of this impact is given below in Figure 3.

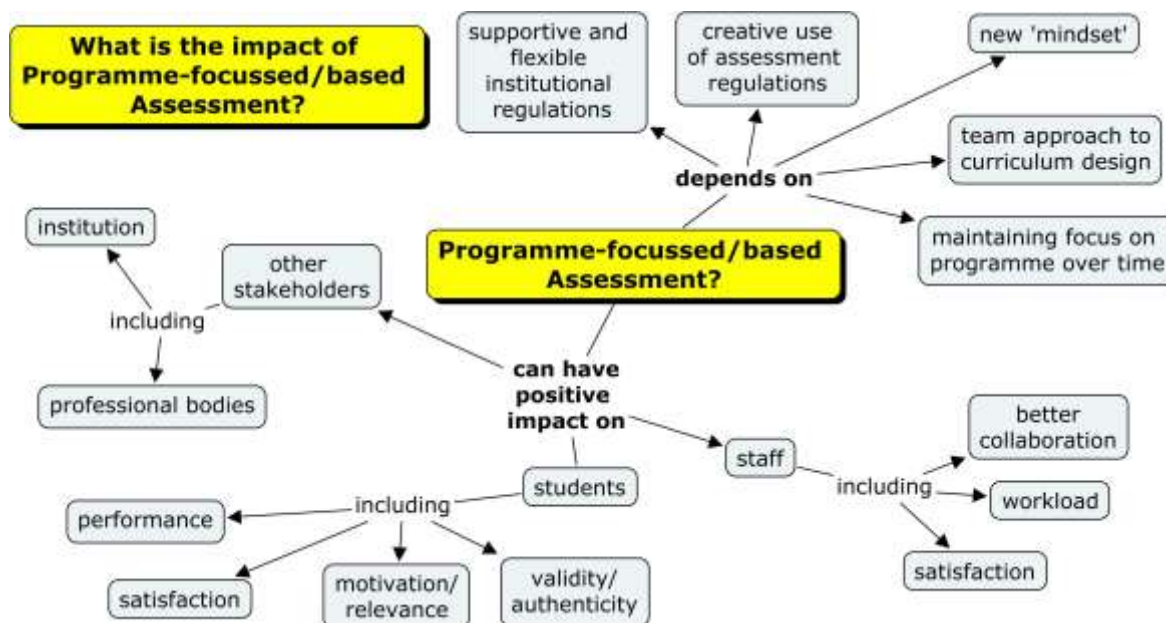


Figure 3 - The impact of Programme Focused Assessment

This diagram highlights some critical features for course or programme teams who are considering a move to programme-based/focused assessment, e.g. the importance of institutional regulations and teamworking. The notion of 'mindset' reflects that fact that many younger staff now working in HE have only ever experienced modularised/semesterised systems and may find it difficult to conceptualise valid alternatives. As a result of this and other potential barriers, we cannot pretend that moving to PFA is an easy process. As Price et al comment, achieving such a programme focus is likely to "require both a creative and a team approach but may challenge some staffs' established working patterns." (2011, Page 490)

## 6 References and sources

PASS Project: <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/>

Price, M., Carroll, J., O'Donovan, B. and Rust, C. (2011) 'If I was going there I wouldn't start from here: a critical commentary on current assessment practices', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36 (4), 479-492.

Rodway-Dyer, S. (2010) "Peninsula Medical School: A case study from the Universities of Exeter and Plymouth." PASS case study available at <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/wp4medschoolcasestudy.pdf>