



Programme Assessment Strategies  
Funded by the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme

# Masters in Design

## Northumbria University

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# *Blurring the module boundaries in assessment at Masters level in Design*

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## **1 Introduction**

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It is well established that assessment acts as a driver for student learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Dunn et al., 2004; Ramsden, 2004) and there is evidence that assessment which is typically linked to module learning outcomes is not always effective in developing student capabilities (Rust, 2007). However, the development and implementation of effective alternatives such as programme-focused assessment (PFA) strategies are challenging for programme teams. One reason for this is that there is a lack of suitable evidence-based guidance and exemplars.

This case study forms part of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) Programme Assessment Strategies (PASS) project. The PASS project aims to identify essential principles of PFA, which can then be used to implement and test the effectiveness of programme assessment strategies (Hartley et al., 2008). This case study is a contribution to that debate. The case study concentrates on approaches to PFA within the Design Masters programmes at Northumbria University.

## **2 Contexts**

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### **2.1 National**

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There is no formal national framework determining curriculum in Design Masters programmes.

### **2.2 Institutional**

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Several of the university's key strategies are addressed in this programme and its assessment:

- **Internationalisation and Employability** - The programme meets the needs of an increasingly broad range of students from across the world. The programme is specifically designed to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the global economy.
- **Research-informed teaching** - The programme is substantially taught and assessed through research-based learning with strong links between the research activity in the School and the Masters students. This is being further developed with the active participation of Masters Students in ongoing research projects led by academics in the School.

## 2.3 Description of the MA Design programme

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### 2.3.1 School of Design Context

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The School of Design at Northumbria University has a national and international reputation for producing innovative and highly creative designers and design communicators. The School has the largest number of students on postgraduate level programmes of any design school in the UK.

A range of postgraduate programmes mirror the disciplines of the design professions and give students a perspective on their future role in relation to other designers. The design disciplines encompassed are: Design for Industry, Fashion, Fashion Marketing, Transportation Design, Graphic Design, Interior Design, Interactive Media Design and Three Dimensional Design. The postgraduate programmes are MA Design and MA Design Management, MA Design Professional Practice (Distance Learning) and MA/MSc Multidisciplinary Design Innovation.

*[Source: MA Programme handbook]*

### 2.3.2 Masters programmes

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The MA Design and MA Design Management programmes are the focus of this case study. They address Design in a business context. The consideration of strategy for creating value through design is at the core. Students join the programmes with prior experience which may be academic and/or work based. These programmes require students to apply design thinking via different design disciplines and may be regarded as cross-disciplinary. The programmes are project-based and much of the learning is student directed. Students work towards to defining and establishing their own position in the practice field that they plan to enter.

In line with University practice the programme is modular. The module structure is illustrated in Fig 1. Most of the modules are taken by students on both MA programmes but there are two subject modules specific to each of the Design and Design Management specialisms.

As illustrated in Figure 1, all students take six theoretical (locally termed 'contextual') modules totalling 80 credits. They also take two subject modules specific to Design or Design Management totalling 40 credits. The six contextual modules support the subject specialist modules by providing students with the tools to develop their own design interests and skills. There is a 60 credit thesis undertaken in the third semester of the programme.

### 2.3.3 Students

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The programme recruits 80-90 students per year about two-thirds of them in September with the rest entering in January. A very high proportion of the students are international, usually about 95%. The students entering the programme come from a design background, for example, having undertaken a related undergraduate degree or with considerable experience in design practice.

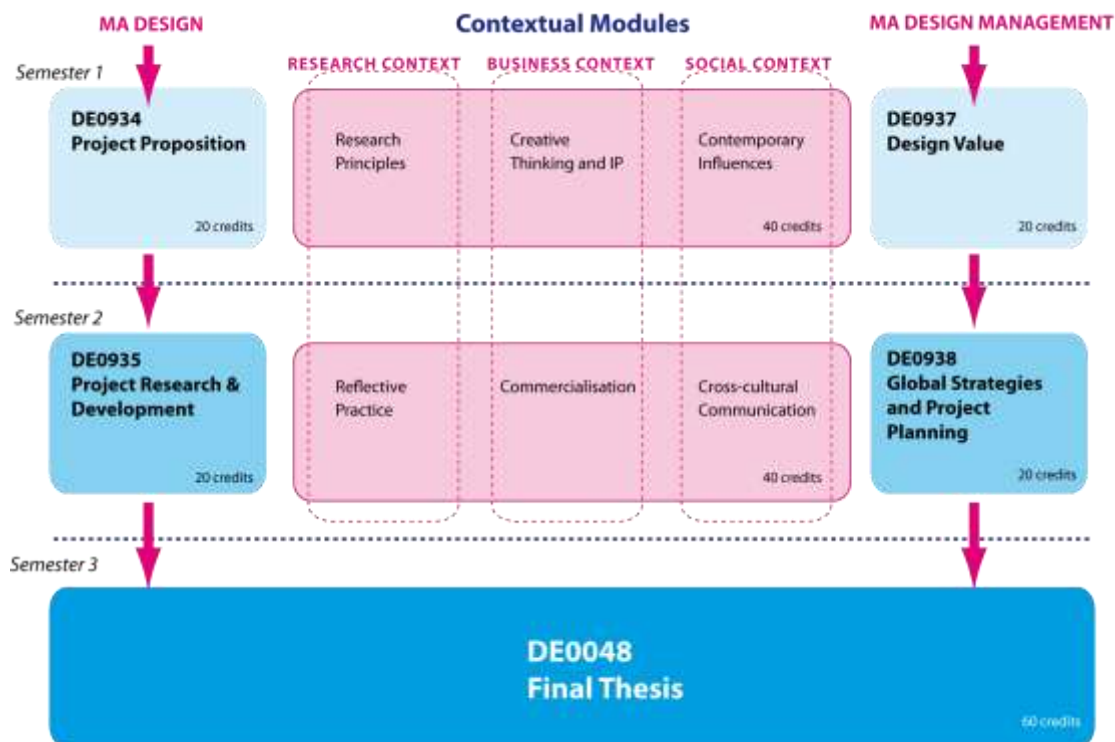


Figure 1 Module Structure

### 3 Case study

#### 3.1 Aims

The aims of the case study are to:

- Describe the MA programmes assessment strategy and its rationale, with emphasis on the integrated assessment of contextual /theory modules.
- Review the development and evaluation of the strategy leading to the current position.
- Explain the ways in which the assessment strategy relates to the PASS criteria for programme-focused assessment.
- Represent staff and student perspectives in the case study.

#### 3.2 Methodology

A detailed case study of the Masters in Design programmes assessment strategy was undertaken via an examination of documentation (including curriculum review document, programme handbook) and interviews with three staff members who were involved in designing the assessment and/or teaching on the programmes.

A questionnaire was designed to elicit student views of their experience on the programme with a particular emphasis on assessment. It drew on pertinent sections of an existing instrument, the AfLQ, which has been validated in use with students to explore their experiences of assessment (McDowell, Wakelin, Montgomery, King, 2011). Sixteen recently graduated students completed the questionnaire in December 2011 and 27 current students (some of whom were in their first semester and some in their second), answered in March 2012. These students had not completed

the whole course. A student representative was interviewed and other students were engaged in informal discussion during one class session.

### 3.2.1 Reflections/rationale/developments

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#### 3.2.1.1 *How the current strategies evolved and why.*

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The current assessment framework has developed over the past ten years or so. In 2009, with student numbers increasing from 40 to 90 per annum over three years, a formal review was started.

The review began with research into different models of post-graduate teaching in other universities. This enabled the School to benchmark its own offering and develop its own strategy. There was a series of discussions with a select number of academics from other institutions. This was followed by a series of consultations and mapping exercises with MA staff in the School. As a result a report with recommendations was produced and shared with staff and the School Executive team.

The aims from the review were to enable further growth and to improve the student learning journey. In more detail the additional objectives were to:

- Encourage better assimilation and application of knowledge.
- Reduce the assessment load.
- Encourage a holistic understanding and development of skills.
- Assess the holistic development of the student.

It was determined that, as a priority, the programme team should plan to move away from the modularisation of the contextual modules in order to encourage assimilation and application of knowledge. The first stage of this was the linking of the theoretical modules in terms of assessment through projects based in the Design practice modules. A second step was the move to Pass/Fail marking of the contextual modules.

#### 3.2.1.2 *The current assessment strategy*

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All modules are assessed with reference to the programme learning outcomes, shown in Fig 2. There are no separate module learning outcomes. This means that the focus is always on the important and key outcomes of the programme overall. However each module uses the programme learning outcomes with a different balance or emphasis. There is a mapping of programme learning outcomes indicating where and with how much weighting each outcome occurs across the modules. This is shown in Fig 3.

<b>Direction – Learning Contract</b>	<b>Focus</b>	Make and keep current an on-going personal and professional development plan and apply it into practice.
	<b>Mastery</b>	Through practice develop an in depth knowledge and understanding of the richness of their own capabilities in the context of their professional value.
<b>Process/Reflection</b>	<b>Organise</b>	Have the ability to work independently or as part of a team demonstrating an understanding of design thinking and processes in resolution of the problem
	<b>Reflect</b>	Operate as a reflective practitioner.
<b>Communication</b>	<b>Portfolio</b>	Present a portfolio of professional practice capabilities and articulate the focus and detail of design value in a variety of situations.
	<b>Communities</b>	Engage in an investigative and developmental dialogue with relevant academic and professional groups and communities.
<b>Enterprise</b>	<b>Realisation Business</b>	Make it happen through organizational planning and teamwork Create real commercial value for organisations.
<b>Research</b>	<b>Theory</b>	Develop an understanding of advanced research methodology.
	<b>Analysis</b>	Collect, analyse and synthesise data
	<b>Application</b>	Employ research methods appropriate to own context of practice.
<b>Innovation</b>	<b>Frame</b>	Deal with complex issues through the representation of Design Problem Space and Design Solution Space.
	<b>Create</b>	Be able to demonstrate innovation in own work and be able to nurture creativity in others.

Figure 2 MA Framework - Programme Learning Outcomes

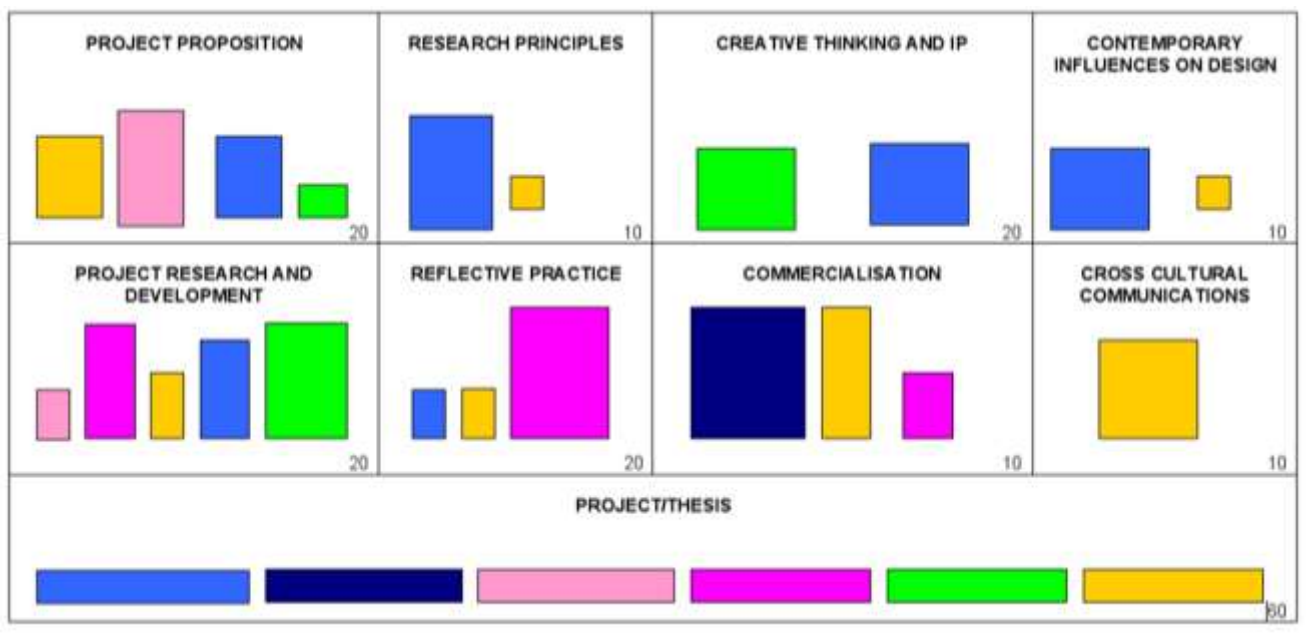


Figure 3 MA Design Structure Diagram



In order to develop 'holistic understanding and development of skills' it was decided to move away from strict modularisation of contextual modules. The three contextual modules in each semester are assessed together on a Pass/Fail basis. The reason for the integrated pass/fail approach is that these modules help students to develop skills, knowledge and concepts and work towards identifying their own strengths and weaknesses and articulating their own position as a professional. The modules act as threshold giving a base line of skills and tools that must then be applied within subject modules.

A range of learning opportunities are available to students including sessions introducing skills and concepts but mostly consisting of participation in a range of activities and projects, often working in collaboration with fellow students and sometimes attached to projects being undertaken by researchers in the School, some on behalf of external clients. Despite a high level of collaborative learning, all summative assessment is of individual students, assessed by coursework including participation in weekly seminars, project work, essays, reports, presentation and thesis.

Projects are the vehicle by which students apply a range of theoretical elements into practice. One major collaborative project runs each semester. In the subject modules students are required to demonstrate application of learning from the contextual modules and this will affect the mark (%) that they are awarded. At all summative assessment points, submissions may be based on work and evidence from any of the modules within the programme. This blurs the distinction between modules, both the contextual and the subject modules. Although modules are identifiable curriculum components they act holistically as learning vehicles and as a resource drawn upon in the completion of assessed work. The thesis module is somewhat different, but it is still the case that learning from across the whole programme is drawn upon as appropriate in the thesis. The programme is based on the principle that a set of learning activities can be drawn upon in different ways to meet a range of achievements.

### *3.2.1.3 Description of the current assessment strategy*

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The focus and formats of the assessed work are substantially student-directed. Students are required to draw on the varied resources and learning available to determine their own pathway and position and produce appropriate submissions. This includes articulating their own position, finding out own strengths and weaknesses and demonstrating performance in a variety of ways. This may mean drawing on learning from anywhere in the programme and hence the boundaries between modules are blurred.

- Experience and reflections of teachers with the new assessment strategy
- Experience and reflections of students with the new assessment strategy

## *3.2.2 PASS Issues – based on WP3 issues paper from Oxford Brookes<sup>1</sup>*

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### *3.2.2.1 Problems/issues that it was intended to address/overcome*

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In relation to the PASS project framework (Rust), the main problems that it was intended to address with this assessment strategy were:

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<sup>1</sup> WP3 Issues paper is available from <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/wp3issues.pdf>

- Insufficient focus on and assessment of the **programme** learning outcomes (as opposed to module LOs).
- Difficulties in assessing **complex and slowly-learned** knowledge, skills and understanding.
- Student **tendencies to 'tick off'** an area of activity at the end of the module, after assessment, rather than taking an integrated view of the programme overall.
- **Too much summative** assessment.

In relation to the PASS categories of programme focussed assessment the assessment here is best represented by the term 'Integrative assessment across stages or levels'. Assessment is integrated in each semester by being focussed around projects drawing together learning from contextual and subject modules. The contextual modules are clearly identified as supporting modules, hence the change to pass/fail marking for contextual modules and the reliance on the output from the subject modules to determine grading. The use of programme learning outcomes throughout means that there is continual emphasis on the key outcomes expected. Assessment at more than one point acknowledges that these capabilities need time to develop and are best fostered through practice, assessment and feedback. The strategy avoids too much end-loading with insufficient interim feedback, which can be the result of leaving the assessment of qualities that develop over the whole programme to the end.

### *3.2.2.2 Achieving the new strategy*

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Staff were engaged in the development of the new strategy for the programme which helped to generate commitment to the new model. The current solution is permissible under the current University credit structures and assessment regulations, although it does to some extent 'stretch' what is permissible by drawing on cross-module learning in the summative assessment of a module, or group of modules.

### *3.2.2.3 Staff perspectives*

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Staff suggest that the strategies in place are generally successful in achieving the aim of linking theory and practice. The way in which the modular structure and the assessment work together gives good opportunities for students to make sense of abstract concepts in context and in use.

It is a complex programme to deliver because of the variety of learning activities in which students engage. It is perhaps inevitable that students, particularly in the earlier stages, feel some sense of confusion and lack of clarity about what they are expected to do. The success of the programme does depend on students taking charge of their own learning and their level of motivation. This mostly seems to be achieved. The programme has very few drop-outs and results are good.

### *3.2.2.4 Student perspectives*

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Student views as evidenced in the questionnaire results were largely positive. The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) Contained a set of 15 statements which students were asked to respond to on a five-point 'agreement' scale: Agree/Agree Somewhat/Unsure/Disagree somewhat/Disagree. In relation to the aims and objectives of the new assessment approach the following comments and student responses are drawn from the questionnaire results from graduating and current students.

The results suggest that the programme is addressing sufficiently the need to pay attention to development over time (Questions 1, 2, 10, 13). The majority of students agreed that:

- the programme prompted them to think about how they were learning and how they might improve (87% graduating students/83% current students agreed or agreed somewhat).
- they were encouraged to rethink their understanding of aspects of the subject (88%/74%)
- they were given plenty of opportunities to develop their skills in the subject (60%/78%)
- they were given plenty of opportunities to test out ideas and ways of thinking about the subject (67%/56%)

The response to Question 4 'Much of what I've learned seems no more than lots of unrelated bits and pieces in my mind' where only a minority of students (13%/19%) disagreed (disagreement being positive in suggesting that what students had learned seemed coherent rather than unrelated) seems out of line. Perhaps the format of the questions confused students. However this would be worth exploring with students groups in future.

Further results suggest that students did not seem to think that they were over-assessed and tended to see assessment as appropriate but there was a divergence of views (Questions 3, 9, 12) . Current students were less positive than graduating students. Students agreed that:

- Doing assessed set work helped me to pull everything together (67%/41%)
- The set work fitted in with what we were supposed to learn (80%/48%)
- The programme is more about learning than jumping through assessment hoops (56%/56%)

The final question above makes a distinction between a strong assessment focus ('jumping through hoops') rather than really learning. The results indicate that students were somewhat ambivalent or neutral in their response to this question.

Students agreed with the following statements (Questions 5, 8) about linking theory to practice and addressing concepts on the programme:

- In making sense of new ideas I have often related them to practical or real life contexts (81%/93%)
- The teaching helped me to think about the evidence underpinning different views (93%/56%)

The difference between graduating students and those currently on the programme may indicate a relationship to the stage of learning, since we are not aware of any change in the programme that might have caused this difference.

Feedback and guidance seem to be helpful to most students (Questions 6,14, 15). They agreed that:

- The feedback given on my work during the programme helped to clarify things I hadn't fully understood (67%/63%)
- The feedback given on my work during the programme helped me to improve my ways of learning and studying (81%/56%)
- Staff gave me the support I needed to help me approach the set work on the programme (81%/67%)

Finally there was a specific question about pass/fail marking in parts of the programme. 75% of the graduating group thought that it was appropriate where used; only 48.5% of current students shared this opinion.

The interview with a student representative and informal talk with current students support some of the findings from the questionnaire. There was general agreement that theory and practice were successfully linked on this programme. The complexity was also referred to with comments about the difficulties of understanding requirements and what you had to do coming from some students. The level of independence in learning was also raised. Some students had expected this whilst others had not. In either case some students welcomed the independence and responsibly whilst others would have liked more direct guidance. There appeared to be a general view that the programme is hard work and students often found themselves very busy but that it was successful in developing the kinds of knowledge and skills that are needed in employment in the design field.

## 4 Implications for Higher Education

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Lessons to be shared with others.

- The Masters programme team were able to blur the boundaries between modules whilst still adhering to the university's module framework. This suggests that it is possible, with some creative approaches, to stretch the structures and regulations to the benefit of integration in learning and assessment.
- The model of assessment used did, in a sense, detach assessment from modules by not focussing on a set package of content such as knowledge and skills delivered and assessed within one module. Instead a broader range of learning could be drawn upon to satisfy module learning outcomes but each module was clearly assessed.
- Using Programme Learning Outcomes in every module rather than identifying distinct Module Learning Outcomes made it easier to assess across the programme. Each module was using the same assessment criteria although the weighting given to each of the range of Programme Learning Outcomes varied between modules. This appears to be a useful way to specify learning outcomes to encourage integrated learning.
- The assessment approach used on the programme was sometimes seen as complex by students and even staff, especially when new staff joined the programme team. However it seemed to be successful in integrating 'theory and practice'. In fact it is a better representation of how things operate in the real world where problems and tasks do not appear in neat labelled packages but need to be identified and clarified and a range of approaches need to be trialled and used in addressing them.

## 5 References

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McDowell L, Wakelin D, Montgomery C, and King, S (2011) Does Assessment for Learning make a difference? The development of a questionnaire to explore the student response *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(7),p 749 -766