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# Programme Assessment Strategies (PASS)

Peter Hartley & Ruth Whitfield

October 2012



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**Key words for report**

Assessment: Programme-Focussed: Programme Learning Outcomes: Integrated Assessment:

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The Higher Education Academy  
Innovation Way  
York Science Park  
Heslington  
York YO10 5BR

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ntfs/ntfs-projects>

Tel: +44 (0)1904 717500

Fax: +44 (0)1904 717505

## Acknowledgements

The Programme Assessment Strategies (PASS) project and the findings in this document are a result of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme project strand initiative funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and managed by the Higher Education Academy.

The project team comprised: Prof Peter Hartley (Director), Ruth Whitfield (Project Manager), Dr Sean Walton, University of Bradford, Prof Liz McDowell, former Director of Assessment for Learning CETL, Northumbria University, Prof Margaret Price, Director of ASKe, and Prof Chris Rust, former Head of the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, Oxford Brookes University, Janice Priestley, Leeds Metropolitan University, Sue Burkill, Head of Educational Enhancement, University of Exeter, Samantha Smith, Honorary Fellow, University Exeter and Consultant, Transition Tradition.

We are indebted to Critical Friends: Prof David Boud, Emeritus Professor University of Technology Sydney, Dr Marcia Mentkowski, Alverno College, Prof David Nicol, Emeritus Professor University of Strathclyde.

Grateful thanks are extended to all those who have supported the project through our “Outer Circle “; those who attended the project’s final event “Assessment Strategies: The way forward” 24/25 July 2012, the institutions who have used our workshop materials, and the HE Academy for their positive and supportive role throughout the project.

Others involved in the project at various stages include: Prof Sally Brown, Prof Ruth Pickford, Richard Canham and Steve Jones, Leeds Metropolitan University, Prof Brian Chalkley, Mel Joyner and Pauline Kneale, University of Plymouth, Lynne Conniss, Northumbria University, Judith Waterfield & Bob West, Plymouth University, Haydn Blackey, University of Glamorgan, John Dermo and Fiona Meddings, University of Bradford.

## Executive Summary

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.

Different assessment practices have significant impact on students' approaches to learning. The programme/course assessment strategy is, therefore, one of the most important influences on students' behaviour. However, there is relatively little guidance or support for course/programme leaders who wish to improve the validity of their assessment strategy (especially modular programmes) – research and innovation in assessment has tended to focus on specific modules and/or techniques.

The project team started from the premise that Programme-Focussed Assessment (PFA) was a strategy which could resolve or alleviate many of the problems and issues associated with assessment in UK Higher Education (outlined in the project's Assessment Issues Paper, Appendix I and available at <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/wp3issues.pdf>). We aimed to test this proposition and identify evidence and examples to support the view that 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. To enable programme and course leaders to make sensible choices, we aimed to produce a framework which included appropriate definitions, practical tools and examples/case studies. These initial aims were based on our assumption that we would find a significant number of established examples of course/programme strategies in mainstream undergraduate courses which demonstrated different levels of programme-focussed assessment and which we could provide a basis for development work with interested courses/programmes. This did not happen – there appeared to be very few examples of what we would classify as programme-focussed assessment - and so the project focussed on:

- Defining programme-focussed assessment and explaining how it can offer an effective response to many of the issues currently confronting assessment practices in UK HE.
- Providing key examples and case studies to illustrate different levels of programme-focussed assessment.
- Developing a workshop format which courses and programmes can use for/on themselves to start the process of producing a programme-focussed assessment strategy.
- Providing background materials and resources to illustrate both the advantages of and the issues in developing and implementing programme-focussed assessment.

The PASS project achieved all these aims – all the relevant materials are freely available on the PASS website at <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/> - and identified key examples, such as the Peninsula Medical School<sup>1</sup> and the BioScience<sup>2</sup> and Mathematics<sup>3</sup> courses at Brunel, where programme-focussed assessment has delivered important improvements to both the student learning experience and to academic teaching staff. Most of these innovations are relatively recent so long-term impact is difficult to assess at the moment. The quality of the innovation does depend on clear aims and objectives, the coherence and commitment of the course team, and the necessary support from institutional regulations and frameworks. HEIs which are prepared to consider working around or outside the limitations of a 'strict modular system' can develop assessment regimes which are much more satisfying and meaningful for staff and students alike.

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<sup>1</sup> CS.1 available at <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/case-studies.php#cs1>

<sup>2</sup> CS.5 available at <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/case-studies.php#cs5>

<sup>3</sup> CS.2 available at <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/case-studies.php#cs2>

## Background

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. Different assessment practices have significant impact on students' approaches to learning (Biggs and Tang, 2007; Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet, 2009, Price et al, 2012). The programme/course assessment strategy is, therefore, one of the most important influences on students' behaviour.

Despite significant growth of research into assessment in Higher Education over the last two decades, there was relatively little evidence at the outset of the project to specifically support programme leaders to develop and implement programme-focused assessment strategies. At that time:

- Programme-Based Assessment was used in many US colleges reflecting QAA's concept of 'synoptic assessment' (Precept 3). But it had not been explicitly investigated in the UK. Other possibilities remained unexplored, alongside concerns that the conventional aggregation of module assessments 'may be inadvertently doing individual students and the enterprise as a whole long-term disservice because of all the fragmentation'. (Sadler, 2007).
- Evidence of significant change at module or assignment level (eg examples from REAP) did not easily generalise to a programme strategy.
- Very few Institutional strategies foregrounded assessment (cf the Assessment, Learning and Teaching Strategy at Leeds Metropolitan, and the way Assessment for Learning was embedded at Northumbria). In many strategies, assessment was implicit rather than explicit. Even with explicit institutional reference to assessment, it was not clear how to 'translate' to programme level.
- Useful summaries and manifestos of general principles (from initiatives such as REAP and the two CETLs in this project - ASKe, and AfL) offered different emphases (for example, compare the '7 principles' (Nicol, 2006), 12 principles (Nicol, 2008), and principles from the AfL CETL)
- Many studies emphasised AfL (assessment for learning). But that could also be viewed from different perspectives. McDowell et al (2008) suggested 3 different varieties: managing learning; academic socialisation; and participation. There was little application of these perspectives to programme-level strategies.
- Innovation in assessment may have unintended consequences if it ignores how different students respond. For example, formative assessment may be a valuable tool to promote transfer of learning across modules but may be mediated by student strategies (eg students viewing a formative opportunity as a 'safety net' - Covic and Jones, 2008) or by the different effects of feedback caused by students' differences in their approaches to study and assessment (cf. Higgins et al, 2002, Duncan, 2007).
- Modern modular structures may have implications for assessment which undermine particular strategies. For example, the development of slowly learnt aspects of 'graduateness' such as academic literacies may be lost, ignored or only serendipitously acquired within fragmented course structures.

## Aims and objectives

The assessment of any and every course in HE should ensure that learners achieve the overall learning outcomes. But this may not happen if we simply 'add up' and average the grades from individual modules. By finding examples of and approaches to Programme-Focused Assessment (PFA) which did resolve this and other problems, we aimed to assist curriculum planners who wished to improve their assessment processes and make assessment more 'meaningful' for their students. Our main aim was to enable programme and course leaders to make sensible choices in their assessment strategy by offering them the best advice and examples we could locate to illustrate the advantages and potential of PFA. To do this, we needed a robust framework which included appropriate definitions, practical tools and examples/case studies. We proposed the following initial aims:

1. Using current 'state of the art' knowledge about assessment in HE to identify principles of best practice and over-arching 'criteria for success' which can inform programme assessment strategies.
2. Using those principles and criteria to develop assessment strategies for programmes across different subject areas and across the participating universities.
3. Developing and evaluating a workshop format which programme teams can use to review and revise their assessment strategies.
4. Developing a common methodology which can evaluate the impact of programme assessment strategies, for use within this project and for later dissemination to the sector.
5. Investigating the impact of both the development and application of assessment strategies from the project on staff and student behaviour, using a common evaluation methodology. We recognised at the outset that the timescale of this funded project would not allow us to complete the longer-term evaluation which this topic deserves. Each of the project partners committed to maintain its evaluation within this overall framework after the funding ceased so that we can identify areas of significant long-term impact.
6. Including at least one case study which adopts a full PBA (Programme Based Approach) to investigate its potential.
7. Disseminating the guidance, examples, methodologies and case studies across UK HE.

These aims were based on our assumption that we would find a significant number of established examples of course/programme strategies in mainstream undergraduate courses which demonstrated different levels of programme-focused assessment and which we could use as a basis for development work with interested courses/programmes. This did not happen. We interpreted this as a direct consequence of the 'dominance' of modular credit-based courses in HE which precluded forms of assessment outside strict module boundaries and this interpretation was reinforced by subsequent discussions with teaching staff at project workshops. Many teaching staff were critical of what they saw as the restrictions which modular systems placed on their assessment practice.

As a result of this lack of examples, the project reviewed and revised its focus, as we discussed in our progress reports to HE Academy (HEA). We refocused on:

- Explicating programme-focused assessment.
- Providing key examples and case studies to illustrate different levels of programme-focused assessment.
- Developing a workshop format which courses and programmes can use for/on themselves to start the process of producing a programme-focused assessment strategy.

**September 2009 – October 2012**

- Providing background materials and resources to illustrate both the advantages of and the issues in implementing programme-focussed assessment

The most significant change in our aims is that we were unable to develop and test as comprehensive an evaluation methodology as we had hoped within the time-frame of the project. This is addressed in part by the HEA publication - “A Marked Improvement Transforming assessment in higher education” - but the evaluation of developments in assessment over time and their long-term impact are important areas which we felt needed to be investigated explicitly through some form of follow-up activity. The HEA agreed, and we are grateful for their approval to deliver a final workpackage to address this.

## Methodology

### Initial intentions

The initial intention was to use a 4 stage iterative process of evidence-gathering, synthesis, practical implementation and evaluation of different approaches to PFA. Institutional teams would be set up in the partner institutions to engage with different subject areas.:

#### Stage 1

Following a phase of 'start-up and scoping', this stage was to review and compile evidence about effective programme strategies. The project team recognised the need to uncover what could be regarded as 'success criteria' for programme-level assessment - how would we know when we'd achieved it effectively? Evaluation of specific assessment methods in particular contexts could then relate to these criteria. Further details of these criteria are available at [http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/overview/index\\_04.htm](http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/overview/index_04.htm).

Having identified success criteria, each institutional team would plan and deliver a relevant workpackage which reviewed key criteria and/or strategies.

#### Stage 2

The reviews would be integrated into 'choice and consequence' guides to reflect the experience of programme areas which had piloted specific PFA approaches. The guides would be translated into a workshop format so programme teams could work through the relevant issues and develop programme-level/based assessment strategies.

#### Stage 3

Each institution would run the workshops in their programme areas and evaluate the impact of this intervention and subsequent changes to programme practices.

#### Stage 4

This stage would include dissemination and embedding of the final project outcomes, alongside planning for future collaboration. All the partners were initially committed to this area as a long-term collaboration beyond the funding period.

### Overall considerations

A range of methodologies were planned to ensure that outcomes and deliverables were both sound and transferable:

- **'Carousel' evaluation**  
Each of the partners was experienced both in project implementation and evaluation. At each stage, we would adopt a 'carousel' approach whereby partner A evaluated the outputs and processes of partner B who in turn evaluated partner C and so on till the loop was complete. The criteria and procedures for evaluation at each stage would be determined and agreed by all partners at the start of each stage and would also be reviewed by the critical friends.
- **Critical friends**  
A small group of independent experts were recruited as critical friends. We hoped that they would operate both individually and collectively, ideally using guidelines for critical friendship such as those which were developed by JISC (<https://camels.pbworks.com/w/page/35213174/Home>) following their use on programmes such as the JISC Users and Innovation and HEA Pathfinder (in which one of the project partners was involved).
- **Major review events**  
As Figure 1 shows on the next page, 3 major review points were scheduled in the project. Each of

those would be an event where each partner presented the results of progress for interrogation by the extended project team plus the critical friends plus student representatives plus representation from the Subject Centres. Critical friends and students were to be consulted during every stage.

## The reality

After completing Stage 1 as outlined above and on Figure 1, it was apparent that:

- there was far less evidence of PFA to draw upon than had been anticipated.
- there was a need to define PFA more closely to bring out the range of practical steps and the range of different strategies which courses could adopt.
- the case for PFA needed more clarity.

Other changes influenced our approach. The structural changes in HEA meant that Subject Centres were anticipating their demise at the same time that we were inviting them to become involved. Changes in structures and personnel in some of the partners meant that they became less centrally involved in the project.

While Stage 1 included all the activities we had planned, we revised and simplified subsequent stages to accommodate these changes and outcomes. Stage 2, therefore, focused on: refining our definitions; identifying case studies and supporting examples; and developing and piloting the project workshop. Stage 3 then concentrated on delivering a series of workshops in HEIs across the UK, dissemination, and capturing the project outcomes in one brief guide to cover issues of 'choice and consequence'. Therefore, instead of the planned one year of development and investigation followed by two years implementation, there was two years of development and investigation followed by fifteen months of implementation.

Figure 2 below summarises the approach which emerged, plotted against a timeline of the 3 years of the project. Boxes in bold type indicate outputs which are freely available from the project website; boxes in bold italic indicate major activities to engage the HE sector.

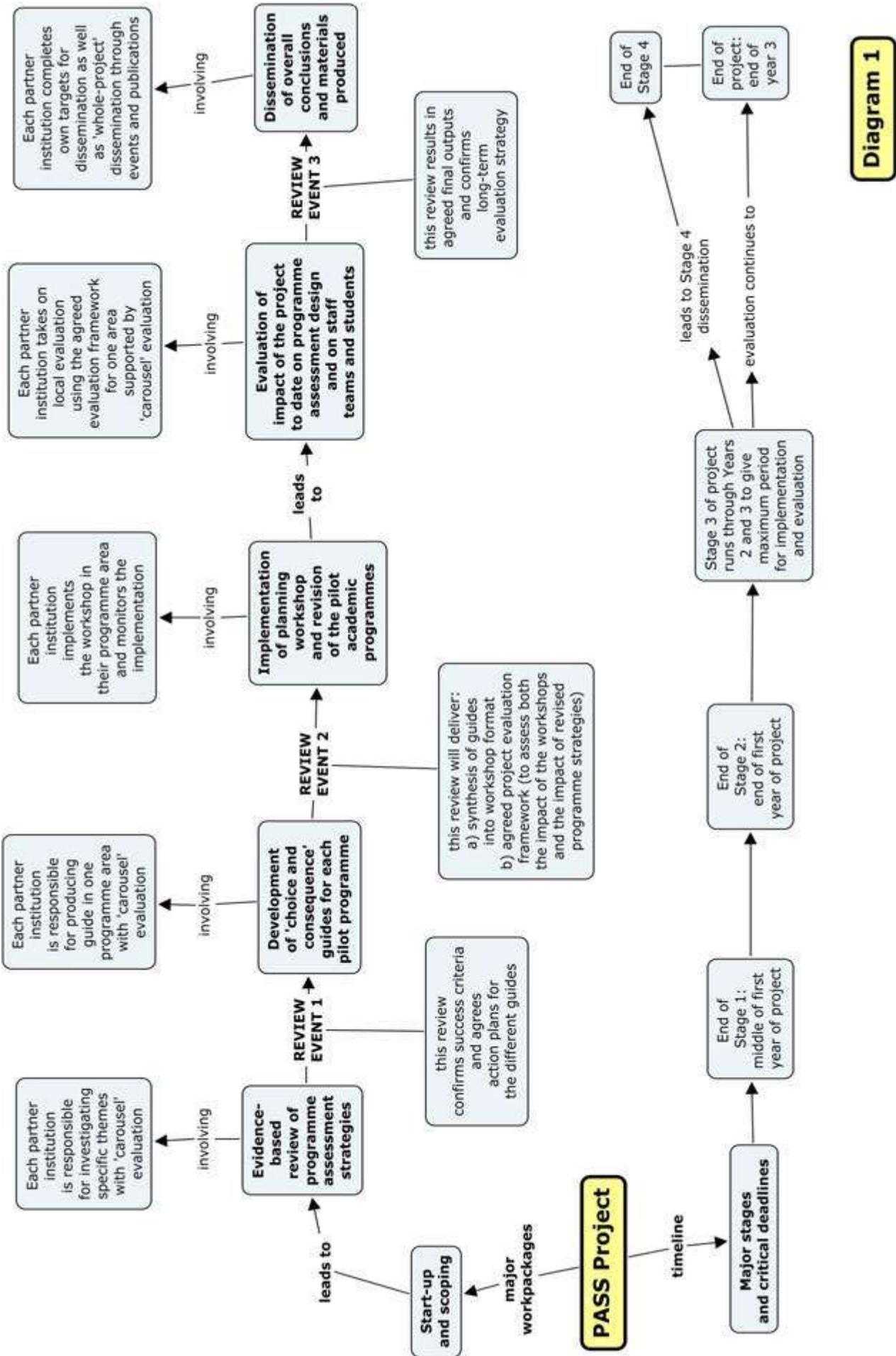


Figure 1 - Original project plan

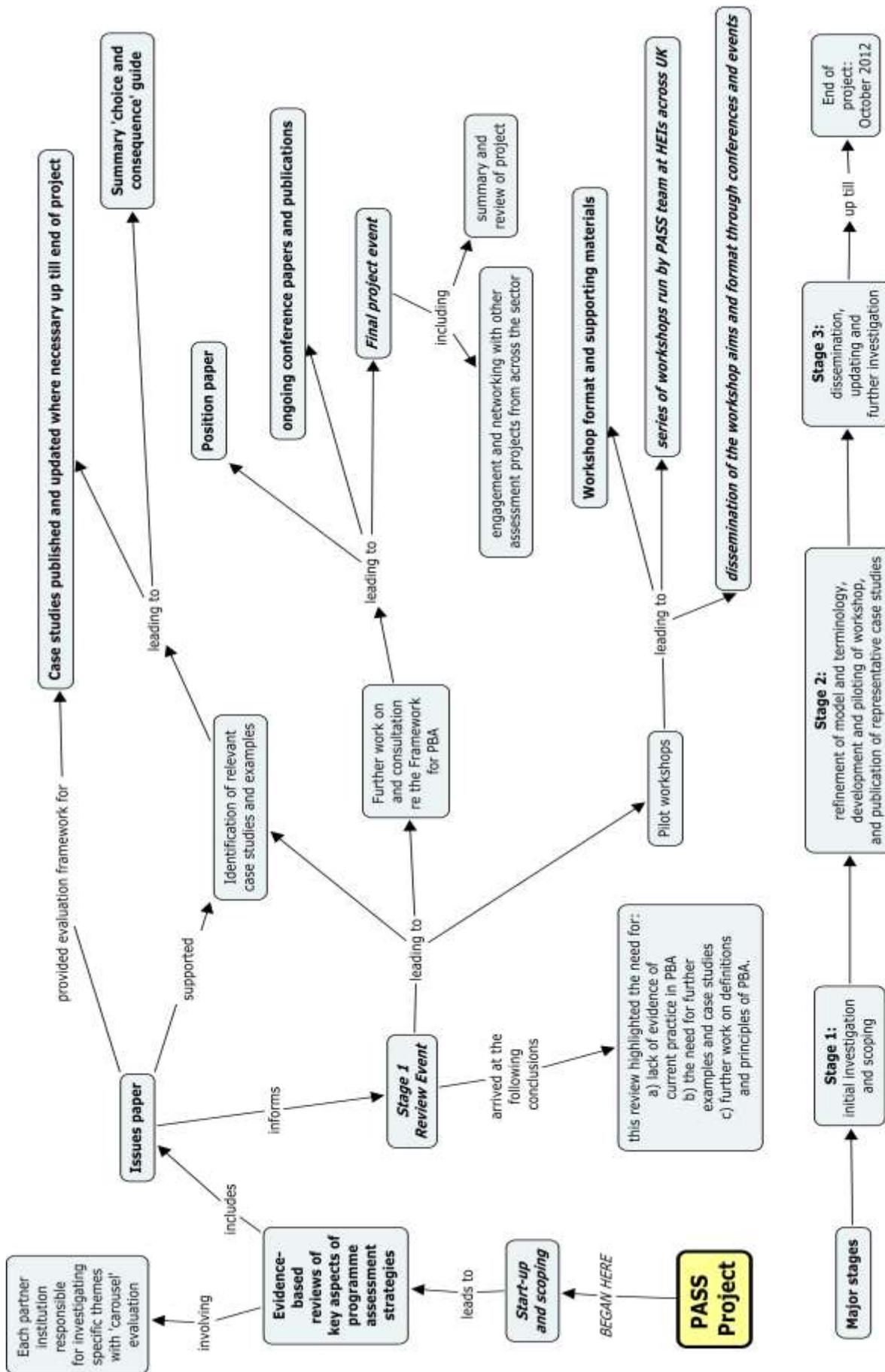


Figure 2 - Actual project timeline

## Implementation

### Stage I workpackages

In its first year, the project followed the original project plan (Figure 1). At its first meeting the project team identified and allocated a number of work packages confident that these would reveal innovative practice across the sector:

1. General literature review – Oxford Brookes
2. Students' view of assessment strategies – Northumbria
3. Assessment issues - Oxford Brookes
4. Medical school case study – Exeter
5. Inclusive assessment – Plymouth
6. Survey of practice across the UK – Bradford
7. Survey of staff attitudes - Leeds Met
8. Assessment types at professional level – Plymouth

An opportunity to timetable a PASS session at the Assessment in Different Dimensions Conference in Melbourne - <http://emedia.rmit.edu.au/atnassessment09/> - gave us the opportunity to collect some international examples which are collated at <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/case-studies/international-examples.pdf>

A summary of the major workpackages is appended to this report (Appendix 2) and details are available from <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/resources.php>.

These workpackages provided the groundwork for the rest of the project with 2 important exceptions:

- WP6 - “Survey of practice across the UK” - floundered due to over-optimism. We hoped that there would be more experimentation in this area which would be discoverable from institutional documents and publicity. We also hoped that the concepts of programme-level assessment would be more commonly recognised.
- WP8 - The “Assessment types at professional level” - also fell victim to the rapidly changing nature of HE that we have all witnessed in recent years, with the retirement of both Plymouth leads.

Chris Rust’s “Assessment Issues Paper” - <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/wp3issues.pdf> - provided a major point of reference throughout the project for all of the case studies and provided the criteria used to judge the effectiveness of the examples we have developed as extended case studies.

### How our ideas developed on the definition of Programme-Focussed Assessment

The 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, if not all, 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).

In the first year, it became evident that there was no overarching framework to capture the rich evidence emerging from the Stage I work packages. Figure 2 gives a concept map that emerged from discussions at the Stage I Review Event in May 2010. Evidence was emerging that the items on the right (eg the collaborative approach to curriculum design) need to be in place for the items on the left to happen. By the end of the project’s first year the project team was debating which principles would help us to move

forward and we discussed issues such as coherence of gradueness and how to account for slowly learnt aspects of the curriculum.

Ideas were also developing about the way that programme-based assessment is likely to develop and some of the main influences on its adoption – our understanding of these factors is summarised in Figure 3.

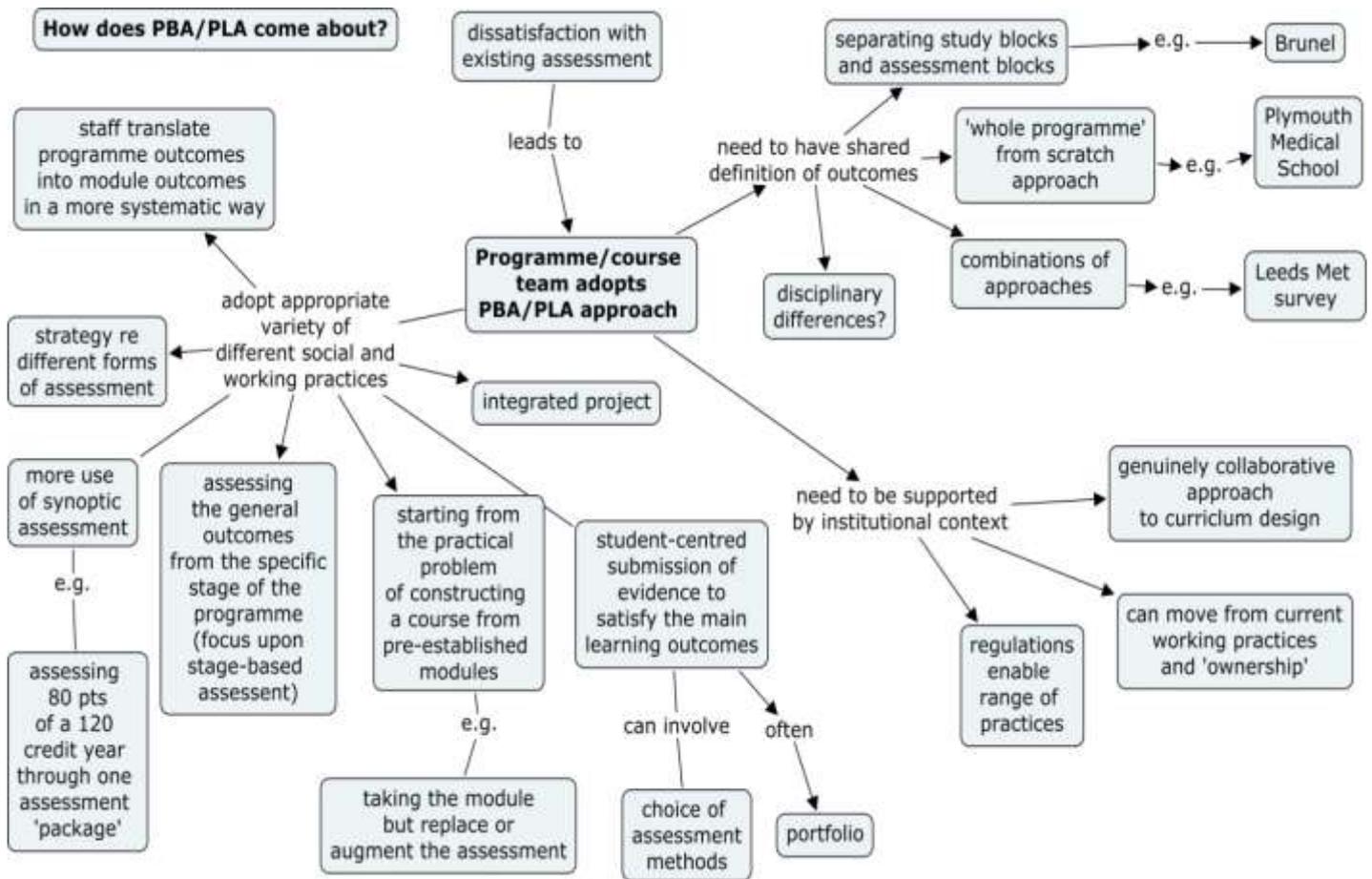


Figure 3 - How does PBA come about?

Towards the end of the first half of the project, a framework for programme-based assessment was also starting to emerge (Figure 4); however, following feedback from critical friends, the team recognised the need to make the project’s vision more explicit.

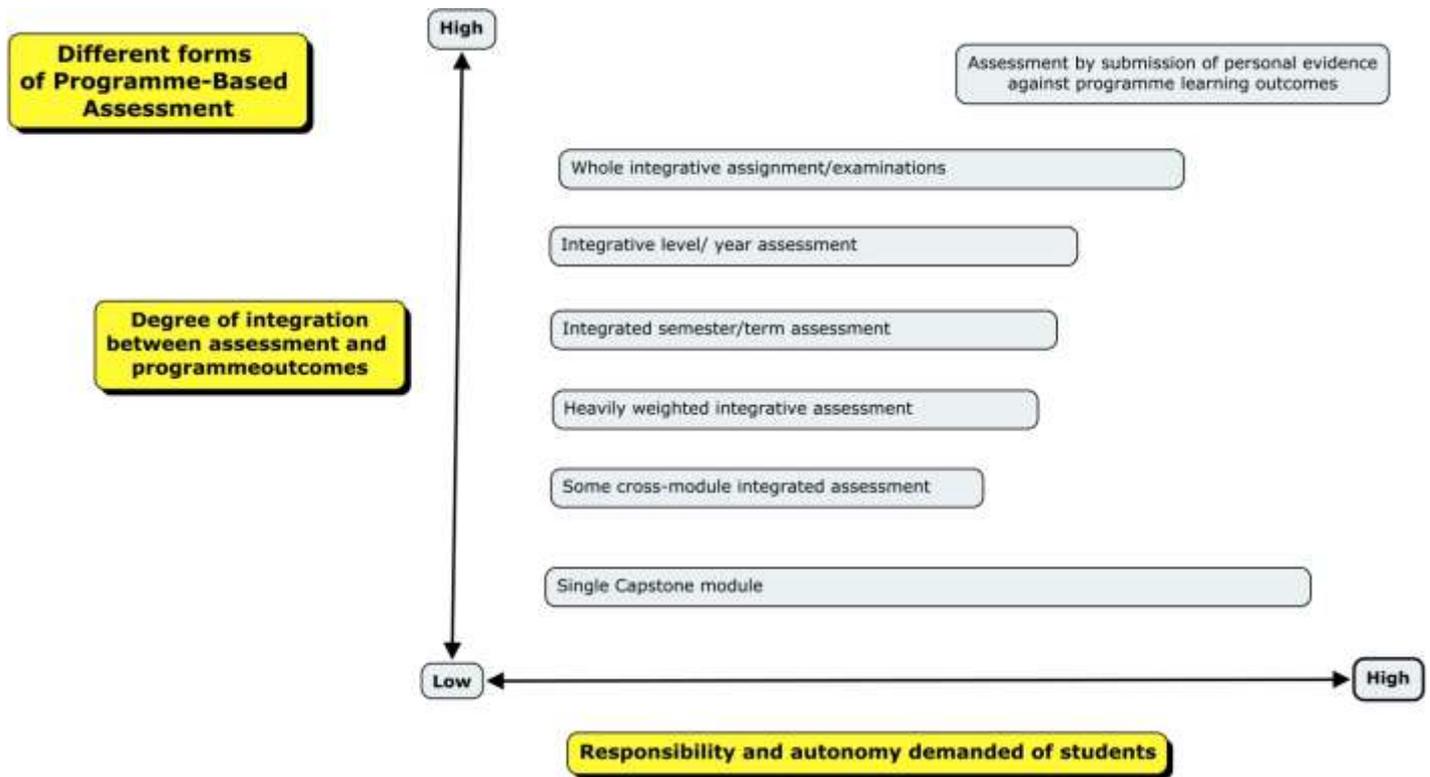


Figure 4 - Different forms of Programme-Based Assessment Version I

The project team met at Conference Aston on 14 July 2011. This meeting, and the feedback received from critical friends, helped to clarify thinking and proved to be a pivotal point in the project. Two further concept maps (Figures 5 and 6) emerged from the discussions. Figure 5 is a useful summary of the main features of what we were still describing as programme-based assessment, namely that:

- it can be defined in terms of a number of essential features (eg it is integrative);
- it can help in a number of ways (eg to ensure that programme outcomes are satisfied);
- it can be achieved in different ways (eg integrative projects).

Figure 5 identifies key aspects of its likely impact, namely that:

- it depends on certain conditions (eg on a team approach to curriculum design);
- it can have positive impact (eg on both staff and student behaviour).

It was increasingly apparent that the project team needed to revisit questions of terminology amid comments that ‘programme-based assessment’ may not adequately represent the ambition of the project. These debates convinced us that some of the terminology was ‘getting in the way’ of uncovering the issues and so we changed to using only ‘programme-focussed assessment’ in documents and workshops. This change was successful in that it captured our focus on overall learning outcomes more successfully and was much better received in the workshops.

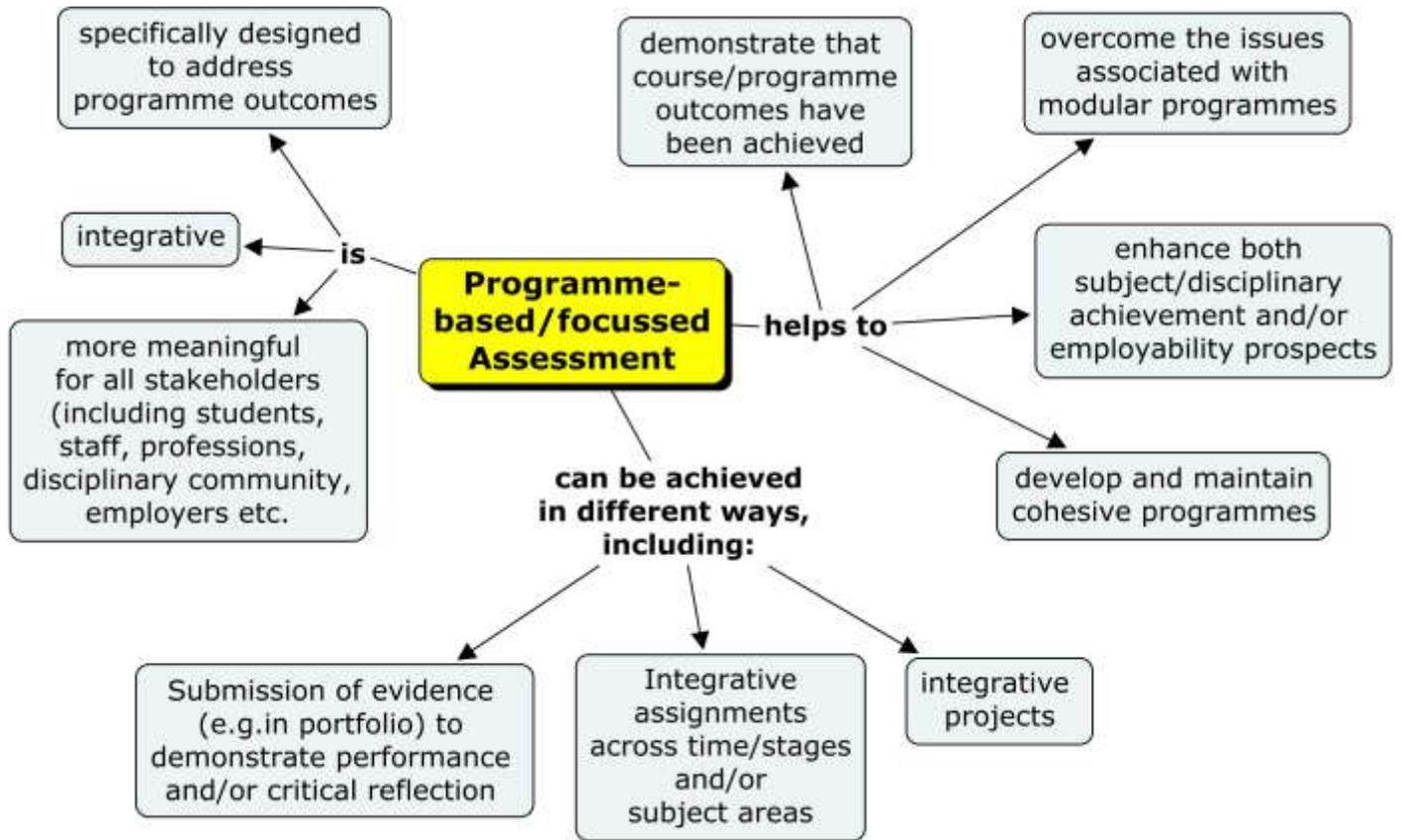


Figure 5 - The nature of Programme-based/focused assessment

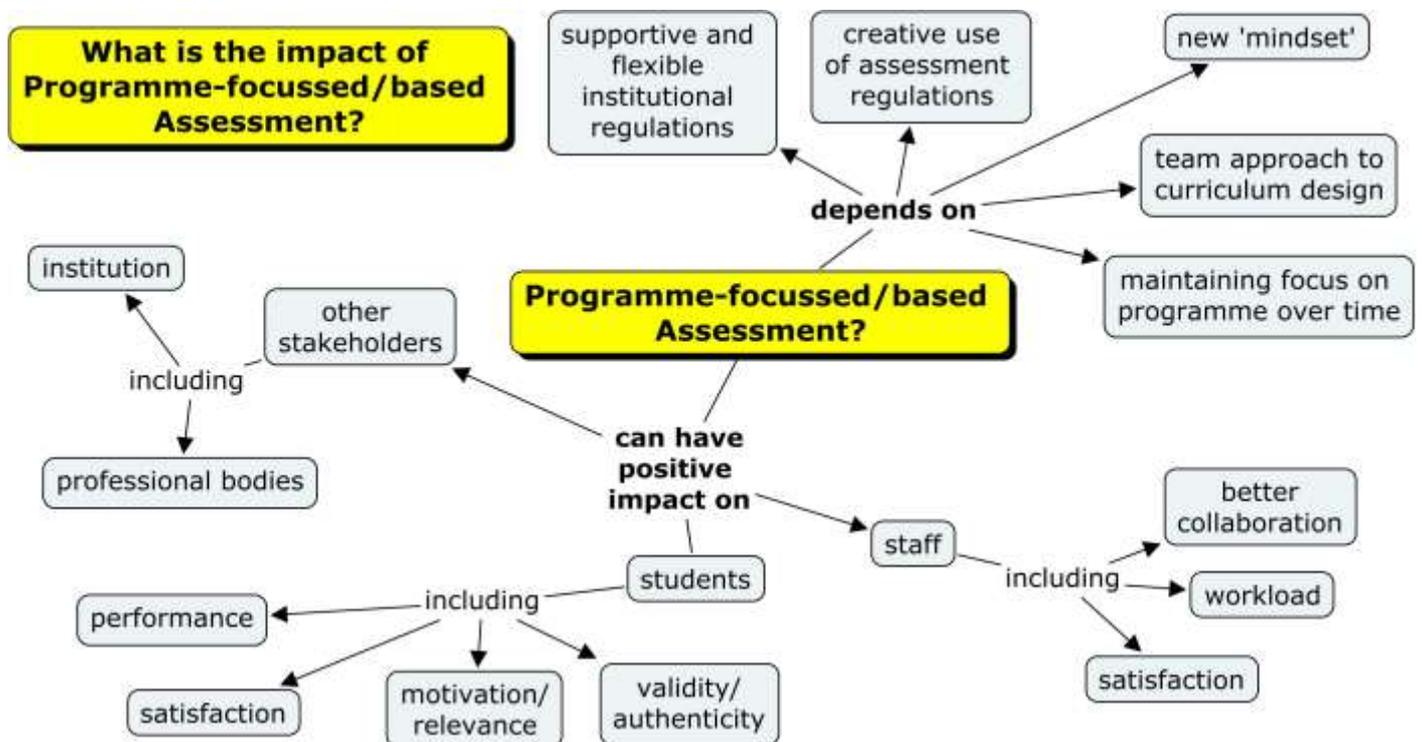


Figure 6 - The impact of Programme-based/focused assessment

The project team seized dissemination opportunities to test their thoughts on others and to tease out where there might be nuggets of innovative practice. By the end of the second year, evidence of significant innovation in assessment with a programme focus was starting to emerge (it seemed that the world of HE might be ready for PASS after all) and the project team's efforts to define PFA had moved a step further (Figure 7). This figure proposes two key dimensions: the extent to which assessment covers all the specified programme outcomes, and the weighting of the assessment in the final qualification. A single conventional module tends to come out low on both these dimensions and so is at the bottom left. As we move towards the upper right corner, we see examples of more programme-focused methods.

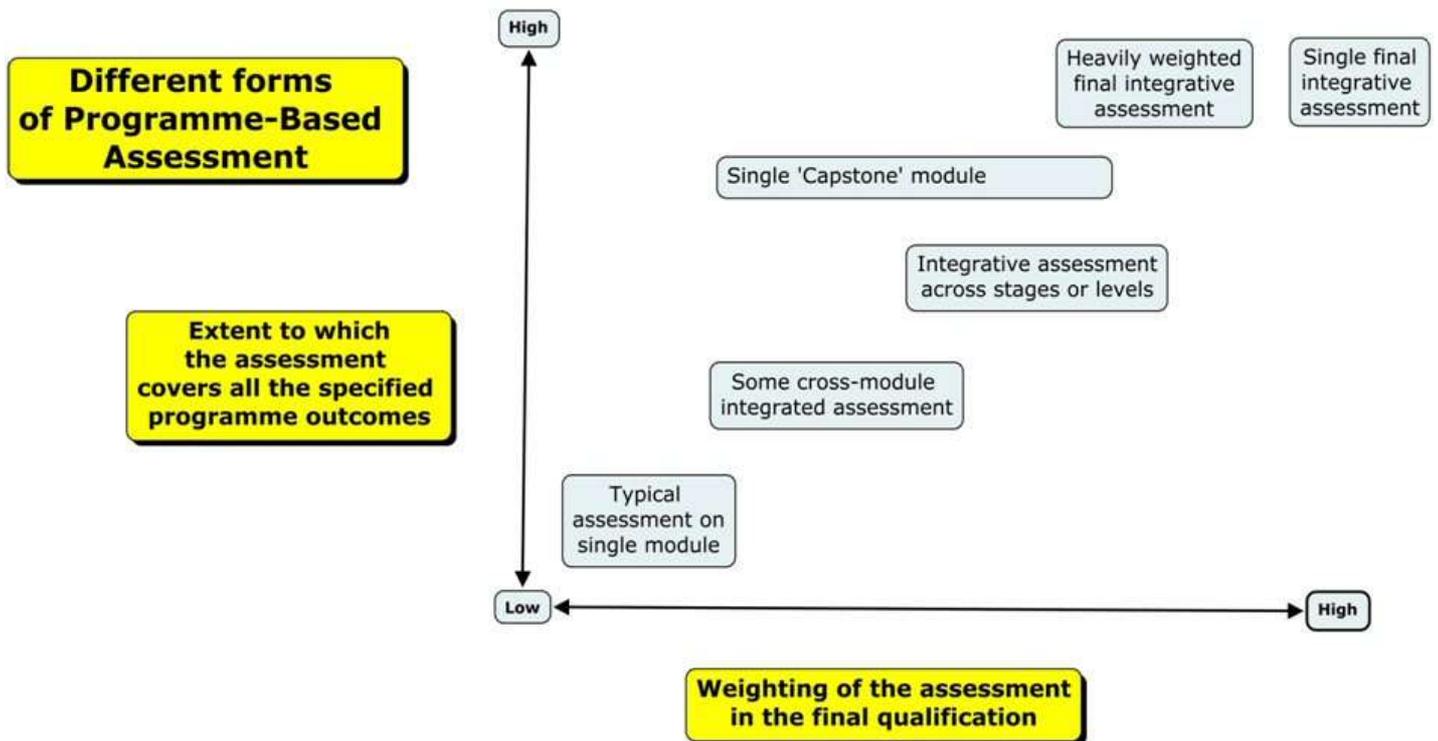


Figure 7 - Different forms of Programme-based/focused assessment, Version 2

By the start of the final year, we were confident that a clear case could be made for programme-focused assessment illustrated by current examples from UK HE and this led to two significant publications, both entitled “The Case for Programme Focused Assessment”, one as a position statement for the website and one journal publication to support dissemination:

- The PASS Position Paper - <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/position-paper.pdf>
- An article in SEDA's Educational Developments, Issue 12.4 - [http://www.seda.ac.uk/?p=5\\_4\\_1&PID=12.4](http://www.seda.ac.uk/?p=5_4_1&PID=12.4)

A further milestone was final agreement on four main types of Programme Focused Assessment:

1. **Assessment by submission of personal evidence against programme learning outcomes:**

In order to pass the programme, students submit work (often in the form of a portfolio) which demonstrates that they satisfy all the learning outcomes which have been specified at programme level.

2. **Final, heavily weighted integrative assessment:**

As a major (but not necessarily the total) part of the final programme assessment, students

complete assessments that demonstrate they satisfy all the learning outcomes which have been specified at programme level.

**3. Integrative level/year assessment**

As part of the overall programme assessment, students complete assessments that demonstrate they satisfy all the learning outcomes which have been specified for one level/year of the programme (horizontal), or more than one level/year of the programme (vertical).

**4. Integrative semester/term assessment**

As part of the overall programme assessment, students complete assessments that demonstrate they satisfy all the learning outcomes which have been specified for one semester/term of the programme.

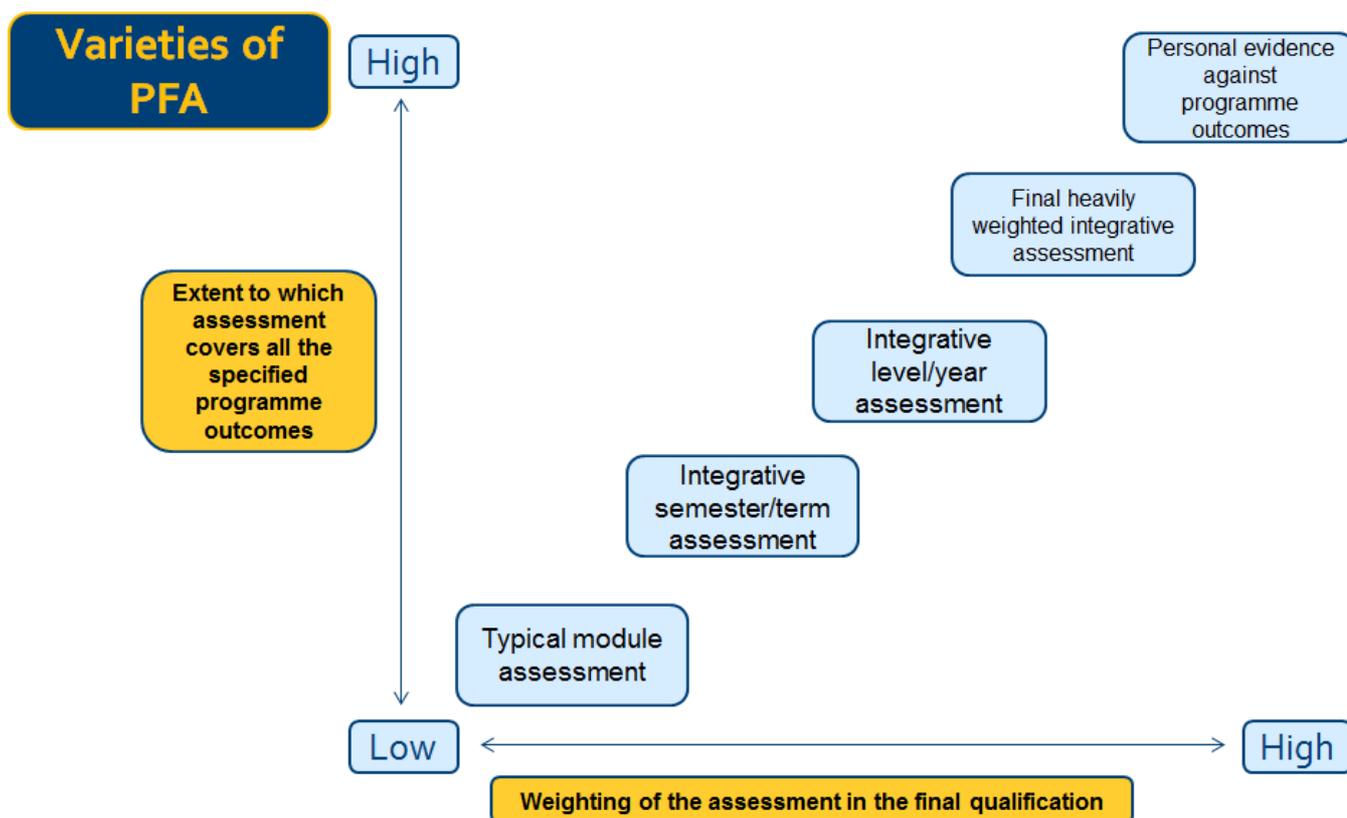


Figure 8 - Types of Programme Focused Assessment, Final version

However, the project team recognised that there may be a number of variants within each type, and major variants are covered in the examples given on the website:

Type	Variant
<a href="#">Submission of evidence against programme learning outcomes</a>	Portfolio
<a href="#">Final, heavily weighted, integrative assessment/examinations</a>	Whole year
	Capstone/specific module
<a href="#">Horizontal integrative assessment across one or more stages/years of the course</a>	Synoptic assessment
	Integrative project
	Integrative assessments
<a href="#">Vertical integrative assessment across stages/years of the course</a>	Professional development portfolio/module
<a href="#">Integrative assessment across semester/term</a>	Integrative project

**Table 1 - Types and Variants of Programme Focussed Assessment**

These types and variants have been tested with a number of audiences and case studies and to date they seem robust.

## The changing face of HE and its impact on PASS

The project has seen major changes in the broader context, including a change of Government, unprecedented changes to the HE sector, and a major review and restructuring of the HEA. The changes at HEA had an immediate impact on the project – our initial intention at Stage 1 was to engage with and relate to at least 6 Subject Centres. All Subject Centres were invited to the Stage 1 Review Event; however, as this came shortly after the announcement of their imminent demise, it was of little surprise that only one was represented. In order to maintain a subject discipline dimension to the project, those who expressed interest in the project during the course of its lifetime were added to an “outer circle” mailing list to which periodic updates were sent and invitations made for comments. The project team also endeavoured to gather case studies from as wide a range of subject areas as possible.

Restructuring/downsizing in HE also had impact on the project team. Several members retired from their post and the project whilst others were involved in significant internal restructuring following the end of CETL funding. Indeed, the Project Director took voluntary severance and retired from his substantive post at the end of September 2010. After the required month’s break in service, he started a part-time contract at Bradford which enabled him to resume responsibilities for the project up to its completion; this necessitated a review of and minor adjustments to the project budget. Similarly, other members of the project team retired from their substantive post and maintained involvement with the project on a consultancy basis.

At the outset of the project, it was proposed that work undertaken on the three stages of work packages would be bid for and invoiced by partner institutions. This presented a challenge to institutional contract managers used to developing more conventional collaborative agreements and there were several requests to put these in place, which we resisted. The process of partner institutions submitting a standard proforma for proposed work on case studies etc and the associated raising of orders and invoices has worked well. It provided the flexibility for those partner institutions that ran into difficulties due to staff changes etc and wished to reduce their involvement with the project. This flexibility also enabled the

project team to focus efforts on the more fruitful case studies so we were still able to complete the project specification as it had been formally revised and agreed with HEA.

## Communication

### Virtual meetings

It became clear from the outset that the geographical spread of the partner institutions and the busy diaries of National Teaching Fellows would present challenges. The use of desktop conferencing - Blackboard Collaborate, formerly Elluminate) has made a considerable positive difference here as it enabled progress meetings without travel (at the time of the original bid, we did not have access to this software). We also developed a consistent approach to each meeting with the Project Director acting as Chair and the Project Manager handling the technical requirements and sequencing of documents/materials, both before and during the meeting. This clear division of roles meant that meetings were both effective and efficient. The technology worked well on the whole but some individuals experienced practical difficulties in their desktop setup and there were connection problems when we used it remotely for the Review Meeting in Oxford. All meetings on Elluminate were recorded so that project partners could refer back if necessary. Summary minutes and updates to the Action Tracker were also prepared by the Project Manager using the recording of the meeting. We would strongly recommend use of this type of software on all multi-partner projects for progress and routine meetings, especially where the partners are diversely located.

### Ning/box.net/Twitter

At the outset of the project we set up a social network on Ning for the project team and critical friends to use; however, we found that the combination of virtual meetings, email and electronic document circulation was sufficient to meet the needs of the project. A central filestore on box.net provided a useful backup and central access area. The project set up a Twitter account @passproject; this provided a useful means of disseminating the latest news about the project which was also pulled into the web site via a RSS feed.

### Action Tracker

The Action Tracker continues to be a valuable tool for tracking progress and providing an audit trail of actions from meetings.

## Engaging critical friends

Because of their diverse locations and limitations in the planned budget, we tended to relate to the critical friends individually and through email. In retrospect, we could have operated more in line with the JISC guidance on critical friends and would have liked to see this way of working adopted more generally by the HEA NTFS project programme (see further comments in the next section).

All documents generated by the project were circulated to critical friends for comment in the first year. We received some important comments but their role was limited; at this stage (one critical friend had to resign from the project at this stage because of other work pressures). An evaluation template was developed and circulated to critical friends during the second year of the project and all three remaining critical friends offered feedback which was invaluable to the project. Although feedback indicated some limitations in the stage 1 work packages, the project team felt that they provided a true reflection of understanding at that stage in the project and, therefore, felt there was little to gain by going back to review them at that point in time.

We continued to engage with the critical friends throughout stages 2 and 3 and they have provided useful input. Marcia Mentkowski provided one of the guest sessions at the final project event and David Boud was able to attend the event. All the critical friends have provided both valuable encouragement and useful critical comments.

## Links with other projects

The most important link we have had with another project has been with TESTA - <http://www.testa.ac.uk/> - which is exploring very similar issues. We had several meetings with the TESTA project team in Stage 1 to ensure that we were familiar with their work and approach (and vice versa) and maintained informal contact during the rest of the project. As a result, we have been able to refer to their work in our own presentations and workshops and they were invited to deliver one of the selected presentations at our final event.

We have also maintained specific links with the other NTFS projects – Assimilate (dealing with assessment on taught Masters’ programmes - see <https://sites.google.com/a/teams.leedsmet.ac.uk/assimilate/>), and Rethinking Final Year Projects the Dissertations: Creative Honours and Capstone Projects (looking at innovative ways of delivering and assessing dissertations and final year projects – see <http://insight.glos.ac.uk/tli/activities/ntf/creativehops/Pages/default.aspx>) – both of which were formally represented at our final project event.

Given that all of these projects are confronting similar issues regarding innovation and institutional change, we would have liked more formal opportunities to exchange ideas and discuss issues with these other projects and would suggest that HEA use approaches like critical friends and CAMEL clusters in any future initiatives where there are a related group of projects.

We used our final project event not just to disseminate our main outcomes and issues but to engage as many UK projects and initiatives in assessment as we could support through the allocated budget. For example, invitations went out to all the projects in the JISC Assessment and Feedback Programme and a majority were able to send a representative. The second half of this event was planned to enable discussion of issues arising and networking across the projects. We received very positive overall feedback:

“An excellent event – thank you. Good to discuss assessment for a time, even better to listen and learn”.

## Outputs and findings

The PASS project has produced definitions and framework to explain and illustrate the potential and variety of programme-focussed assessment, supported by current case studies from various subject discipline areas across UK HE.

The PASS case studies demonstrate the current impact of programme-focussed assessment on both students and staff and show how it can be implemented in different ways and at different levels.

Most of the innovations explained in the case studies are relatively recent so long-term impact is difficult to assess at the moment. The final workpackage aims to address this.

The quality of innovation in programme-focussed assessment does depend on clear aims and objectives, the coherence and commitment of the course team, and the necessary support from institutional regulations and frameworks.

The project has also developed and tested a workshop format which can be run by course/programme teams in universities on/for themselves. This workshop introduces the main ideas developed during the project and uses different examples to enable participants to consider the potential applications and implications for their own context.

All the materials and examples to run the workshop are freely available on the project website and will shortly be augmented by a webinar recording which explains the context and process for anyone who needs further background.

## Outcomes

The main project achievements are summarised in the following table:

Aim	How and where this has been achieved
Defining programme-focussed assessment and explaining how it can offer an effective response to many of the issues currently confronting assessment practices in UK HE.	This is fully explained in the Position Paper on the website and has been tested for understanding and relevance in both conference and workshop sessions with a wide range of teaching and support staff from across UK HE.
Providing key examples and case studies to illustrate different levels of programme-focussed assessment.	All the examples and case studies are on the website, classified according to the level of programme-focussed assessment which they illustrate.
Developing a workshop format which courses and programmes can use for/on themselves to start the process of producing a programme-focussed assessment strategy.	After initial piloting, the workshop has been run by members of the project team at 11 institutions. It is structured so that institutional members can easily run it and adapt it to suit their own context.
Providing background materials and resources to illustrate both the advantages of and the issues in developing and implementing programme-focussed assessment.	The short guide and/or the Position Paper provide useful introductions which can be explored via the case study examples and the two discussions of institutional strategic change.

**Table 2 - Main project achievements**

In terms of impact, we have been able to demonstrate the potential and current impact of programme-focussed assessment to:

- the general audience of HE professionals (through conferences and publications – see <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/events.php> for a full list)
- active innovators in assessment in HE (through the final project event)
- course and programme leaders and staff in specific institutions (through the workshop).

Examples of immediate impact include:

- Influence on current programme planning such as the new Pharmacy programme at Bradford, which has also influenced the institution's developing curriculum framework.
- Publicising innovation in regulatory structures such as the Brunel regulations which has led to their receiving contact from several other institutions.
- Requests to follow up aspects of specific case studies, eg the veterinary college that was interested in the Peninsula case study.
- Requests to use specific materials produced by the project, eg the materials on inclusive assessment.
- Interest from the Assessing and Assuring Graduate Learning Outcomes Principles and Practices Within and Across Disciplines (AAGLO) project at the University of Sydney – see <http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/projects/aaglo/> - which is citing PASS in their project report and will be engaged in our forthcoming webinar.

Our long term impact obviously depends upon staff in institutions taking the ideas further, using our case studies as exemplars and inspiration, and using/adapting our workshop format as appropriate. Our final workpackage aims to:

1. Evaluate on-going effectiveness and influence of PASS case studies.
2. Evaluate the effects of the PASS workshop.
3. Investigate the extent to which programme focussed assessment is seen as a strategic priority in institutions and national bodies.
4. Support the continuation of PASS workshops by providing administration and organisation.

Whether or not courses adopt the specific strategies we have highlighted, there should be significant long-term impact from PASS (and related projects like TESTA) in showing academic and administrative staff across HE that there are a *range* of assessment methodologies which can resolve issues associated with 'standard' modular structures.

In terms of our project operation, there are a few features which may be useful to other future projects:

- The use of desktop conferencing to enable more efficient routine meetings.
- The use of workpackage agreements rather than formal memoranda of understanding.
- The structure of the workshop which institutions can run for themselves.

If there are any future programmes of this scale then we feel that this should be an important opportunity for HEA to review and revise their mechanisms for project support. For example, it would have been useful to have more formal and facilitated contact with other related and relevant projects and perhaps this could have been tied into some feedback on progress and development. Our proposals for sessions at the 3 HEA conferences during this project were all rejected and we obviously feel that this was a missed opportunity to further disseminate the work. While we would not want our presentations to be evaluated any less stringently than other proposals, we do think that the HEA constituency should be given maximum opportunities to review the benefits and progress of HEA funded activity and be able to influence its future direction.

## Conclusions

Our overall conclusion is that HEIs which are prepared to adopt PFA in its different forms can develop assessment regimes which are both satisfying and meaningful for staff and students alike, and which do resolve many of the issues which have been associated with assessment on current modular systems. However, our case studies and examples do suggest that you cannot simply change course assessment without considering its impact on other components of the course and without planning accordingly.

There are different approaches to and levels of PFA which can be considered by course teams and which can suit different contexts.

Where it has been carefully implemented, PFA can offer significant advantages to both staff and students. There can be positive impact on staff workload and job satisfaction. The resources devoted to summative assessment can be reduced and this can be used to provide more formative assessment and student support.

The necessary conditions for effective PFA seem to be clear aims and objectives, the coherence and commitment of the course team, and the necessary support from institutional regulations and frameworks.

Given appropriate and flexible institutional regulations, course teams can adopt different varieties of PFA to suit their own context and student needs.

## Implications

An important implication of the PASS project is the influence of the institutional regulatory framework for the mindset of course/programme leaders and academic teaching staff. Modular systems do seem to have been implemented rather rigidly and have become so entrenched in UK HE that many staff seem to have difficulty visualising alternatives or flexibilities which might improve student learning. Of course, for many younger staff, modular systems are the main if not the only structure they have experienced for themselves. Where institutional regulations are deliberately framed to encourage flexibility beyond the conventional modular structure then course teams can demonstrate significant initiative and innovation. This is an area which HEA should investigate more systematically.

In terms of current practice, PASS has shown there are viable alternative assessment structures which help both staff and students. The long-term impact of these innovations is worth investigating and that is an obvious further development of this work which could be undertaken through/by HEA.

As we were closing the project, we became aware of other institutions developing or announcing initiatives which seem to have many characteristics of PFA but which we did not have the time or resources to investigate (eg the New Academic Model from the University of East Anglia – see <http://www.uea.ac.uk/ltqo/taught-degree-programmes>). Some way of collating and reviewing these initiatives would form a very useful continuation to PASS.

Several other projects have worked on issues relevant to PASS, both ones supported by HEA (eg TESTA) and from other initiatives like the JISC Assessment and Feedback Programme. We planned our final event to bring together as many of these initiatives as we could and this was a very valuable event. Some way of building on this collaboration would be another useful further development.

## Recommendations

Our main recommendations are that:

- HEIs and course/programme leaders/teams should actively consider the application of PFA in order to improve student learning, ie the potential to increase deep learning, and staff engagement in their own context.
- HEA should collate and compare the outcomes of the PASS project with outcomes from related projects like TESTA and consider ways of disseminating results and lessons learned.
- HEA should undertake or sponsor long-term evaluation of the most important innovations highlighted by the PASS project. In her final evaluation, Marcia Mentkowski suggested that for the sustainability of the project “funds be awarded to the more promising cases, selected by the program directors, so that follow-up studies of the cases can be completed in three years. Without a *test of sustainability*, some cases may fall by the wayside. In my view, these few years do not sustain projects of this magnitude and promise.”
- HEA should undertake to review and disseminate future developments in this area across UK HE.

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## Appendix I

### Assessment Issues

Oxford Brookes, Chris Rust

#### **1. Problems/issues we are trying to address/overcome:**

- 1.1 Failure to ensure the assessment of the espoused programme outcomes.
- 1.2 Atomisation of assessment focused, at the micro-level, on what is easy to assess; failure to integrate and assess complex, higher-order learning; the sum of parts not making the intended whole.
- 1.3 Students and staff failing to see the links/coherence of the programme.
- 1.4 Modules are too short to focus and provide feedback on slowly learnt literacies and/or complex learning.
- 1.5 Students and staff adopting a 'tick-box' mentality, focused on marks, engendering a surface approach to learning.
- 1.6 Tendency to assume that 'one size fits all' when it comes to module assessment (with implications regarding cultural differences and students with disabilities).
- 1.7 Overuse of (institutional) rules focused on standardisation that impede innovative development of progressive and integrative assessment.
- 1.8 Too much summative assessment, leading to overworked staff, and inability to 'see the wood for the trees' in the accumulated results.
- 1.9 [Questionable statistical practices](#)\*

#### **2. Major problems/issues in what we are trying to achieve:**

- 2.1 Student (lack of) motivation to undertake solely formative work leading to loss of the potential benefits of coursework, and possible reduction in student engagement and lack of feedback on progress
- 2.2 Persuading, and perhaps finding resources for, module/unit leaders to work together to take a programme view
- 2.3 Lack of a core framework of modules within some programmes to provide a common student learning experience on which to base integrative programme based assessment.
- 2.4 How to assess integrated learning from across units/modules
- 2.5 Credit structures linked to units/modules and assessment regulations
- 2.6 Possibly implications for academic year structures
- 2.7 Ending up with 'high-risk' assessment

#### **3. Potential benefits, if successful:**

- 3.1 Integrated learning and assessment at the meta-level, ensuring assessment of programme
- 3.2 Students taking a deep approach to their learning
- 3.3 Increased self and peer-assessment, developing assessment literacy
- 3.4 Greater responsibility of the student for their learning and assessment, developing self regulated learners

3.5 Reduced summative assessment workload for staff (especially connected with QA)

3.6 Possibly smaller number of 'specialist' assessors leading to greater reliability

3.7 Possible greater opportunity to allow for 'slow-learning'

3.8 Possible link to, and enhancement of, PDP, leading to greater preparedness for CPD processes after graduation

### **\*Questionable statistical practices**

There are a number (Rust, 2007) which include:

- The fact that, usually, outcomes judged against different criteria are then aggregated together into one single number/mark which obscures the differing levels of attainment against each.
- Some marks may be what Sadler calls transactional and/or bestowed credits & debits (Sadler, 2009) – eg marks for attendance or penalties for something that has not been done – and have nothing to do with judgments of knowledge, skills or abilities
- The fact that these scores/marks for individual assignments are then added to others from other assignments, and further aggregated, and then this process is further repeated with scores/marks from different modules. This is done regardless of what they were assessing (and is essentially adding apples to pears) and regardless of what the range of marks were in any given case. These practices are statistically indefensible.
- These practices also operate ignoring what we know about the distortion of marks by the type of assessment (eg students are known to be more likely to score more highly on coursework than in examinations) and the actual subject discipline/s studied (Yorke et al, 2002; Bridges et al, 2002). Maths students, for example, are more than three times more likely to get a first than history students, and this is simply because good work in maths can get 100% while good work in history may only get 72% but the central university system will treat these marks in exactly the same way, regardless of this fact.
- And it is also well documented that the idiosyncratic institutional rules can cause up to a degree classification difference with the same set of student module outcomes (eg Armstrong et al, 1998)

## Appendix 2

### Major Workpackages

Title	Description	Completed by
<b>Programme-level Assessment</b> <b>A review of selected material</b>	General Literature Review	ASKe, Oxford Brookes University
How do student see programme level assessments?	A case study from Northumbria University	Northumbria University
Assessment issues	Overview of assessment issues	Oxford Brookes University
Peninsula Medical School	An extended case study from the University of Exeter and Plymouth (CS.1)	University of Exeter
Inclusive Assessment Diversity and Inclusion – the Assessment Challenge	Paper	University of Plymouth
Setting the agenda for Inclusive Assessment: an auditing tool	An auditing tool	University of Plymouth
Staff Attitudes to programme Level Assessment	Survey of staff at Leeds Metropolitan University	Leeds Metropolitan University
Peninsula Medical School	A short case study from the University of Exeter and Plymouth (CS.8)	University of Exeter
Big Dilemmas Project	An extended case study from the University of Exeter (CS.12)	University of Exeter
Leadership and management in the Air Travel Industry FdA Case Study	An extended case study from the University of Exeter (CS.4)	University of Exeter
Leadership & Management in the Air Travel Industry	A short case study from the University of Exeter (CS.3)	Transition Tradition Consultancy
Leadership & Management in the Air Travel Industry, FdA Case Study – Evaluation and Impact	An extended case study from the University of Exeter (CS.13)	Transition Tradition Consultancy

Title	Description	Completed by
Brunel University, School of Information Systems, Computing & Mathematics	A short case study from Brunel University (CS.2)	Chris Rust (Consultancy)
Brunel University, School of Health Sciences and Social Care	A short case study from Brunel University (CS.5)	Chris Rust (Consultancy)
Coventry Business School	A short case study from Coventry University (CS.6)	Chris Rust (Consultancy)
Masters in Design, Northumbria University	An extended case study (CS.9)	Northumbria University
Teesside University, School of Science and Engineering	A short case study (CS.10)	Northumbria University
Brunel University	An extended case study (CS.11)	Chris Rust (Consultancy)
Newcastle Business School	A short case study (CS.14)	Northumbria University
Pharmacy	A short case study (CS7)	University of Bradford
Interpreting Programme-Focussed Assessment for Validation of Programmes	Report of one university's experience	One of the partner institutions (name retained to maintain anonymity of the University involved)
Evaluation	A long term evaluation of the impact of PASS project for delivery mid 2013	Oxford Brookes University