



Programme Assessment Strategies  
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# How do students see programme level assessments?

A case study from  
Northumbria University

Professor Liz McDowell; Dr. Catherine  
Montgomery; Lynne Conniss; Angelina  
Wilson, Northumbria University

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# *How do students see programme level assessments?*

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## **1 Aim and background**

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The aim of this element of the PASS project is to generate some initial data on student perceptions of programme level assessment. This small case study aims to begin the process of providing evidence-based guidance that will enable staff such as programme leaders to consider effective cross-programme or programme-based assessment strategies. The case study will contribute to developing understandings of how programme assessment might operate across a range of subject disciplines.

## **2 Methodology**

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In order to access student perceptions of programme assessment, qualitative focus groups were selected as a means of gathering exploratory preliminary data that would form a basis for further research and discussion activity. This small element of the wider data collection planned by the PASS project will contribute to the multi-method approach and provide one piece of evidence upon which the project will base its guidelines.

Appendix 1 shows the focus group schedule developed through in-depth discussions with the Northumbria team and with consultation with the wider PASS project participants. The following considerations guided the development of the focus group questions:

- students might not recognise the idea of programme level assessment so the questions identified programme assessment as ‘one assessment for several modules’
- discussion questions focused on interrogating the links between the existing modules on their programme as a means of establishing perceptions of coherence or fragmentation in learning. In other words students were asked about how many modules they were involved in, how they saw the purposes of those modules in the context of the whole programme and the relationships between modules.
- we also included questions about ‘graduateness’ and asked whether students could describe graduate attributes in their discipline area (with a view to thinking about assessment of a graduate of a particular programme as a whole).
- students were also asked about their dissertation (where applicable) and whether they felt their dissertation was a way of drawing together assessment of their programme (in the manner of a capstone course).

Following the development of the focus group schedule, the identification of the student sample was discussed. It was decided to focus on second or final year students who would have a better understanding of university assessment systems. It was also considered important that a mix of subject disciplines were included and that these should be more

'traditional' subject areas rather than 'professional' or vocationally-focused subjects such as Design or Performing Arts where programme assessment philosophies are to some extent already at work. Three main subject areas were selected: humanities, education and engineering and it was suggested that these would provide illustration of a range of assessment contexts. Students were for the most part interviewed in subject groups in order that they could discuss aspects of their own programme. The following data was collected from a total of 14 students:

- one focus group with four 3rd year students, (1 English Language, 3 Childhood Studies).
- one focus group with two 2nd year students (both English Literature).
- one focus group eight with 3rd year students (all Mechanical Engineering).

### 3 Findings

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Once focus groups had been recorded and transcribed the data was analysed in two ways, firstly drilling down into each group discussion and secondly drawing out issues across the three discussions. This section on findings presents a brief analysis of each focus group and the following section entitled discussion will provide a discussion of the findings within the wider context of the aims of the PASS project.

#### 3.1 Focus Group 1 (Childhood Studies and Eng Lang)

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The following points were drawn from the students' discussion:

- students mainly talked about their courses in terms of topics or subjects rather than siting these within broader programme subjects and it seemed likely that these topics or subjects mapped on to individual modules.
- there was an indication in the students' discussions that they were recognising the development of more generic skills/capabilities associated with what they were doing in individual modules. These included the idea that they were becoming able to 'challenge' ideas and developing the ability to write effectively in an academic context.
- The idea of coherence across modules was discussed as something the individual student achieved themselves (as opposed to the design of the programme achieving this). Students talked about 'blending [it] together', for example. This coherence was also associated with assignments and using choice in these to develop 'your own path'. It was also noticeable that coherence was variable with some students noting that some topics/modules on a particular programme 'obviously' link and others don't. On the other hand in another programme a student noted that 'everything overlaps' and 'you can't separate out each module'.
- The dissertation was viewed as something special that marked out a graduate, with one student saying 'I won't see myself as a graduate until my dissertation is handed in'. One student related the completion of her dissertation to a transformation in the way she thought.
- The student discussion on their dissertation suggested that they felt it may have been integrative in nature. One student referred to the dissertation covering 'all different

areas'; others said you used the 'skills' and a number of the subjects covered in the modules by doing a dissertation.

- Being a 'successful graduate' was mainly seen by the students in relation to a job – getting a job or being in a job. The breadth of what you've done on a degree rather than individual topics seemed to be viewed as the substance of what students believed they would take into a job.
- When asked about overlap in assessment between modules, students talked about consistency of procedures, for example, where modules used the same marking criteria. In terms of learning, one student questioned the value of feedback on assignments because 'I'm not ever going to do that assignment again'.
- However, students suggested that the development of skills and independence was helped by the modules being really varied, alongside assignment work that made you read and research.

Students raised issues and made specific comments relating to assessment of more than one module. The following were the most prominent comments:

- Practically it couldn't work – if it covered teaching by more than one lecturer who would mark it?
- The modules are so varied that you couldn't bring them together on one assignment.
- A big assignment means that you don't have the same chances to try and improve as you do with a larger number of assignments over the year. It's not helpful – too risky.
- Risk was also raised by another student in relation to the possible form of 'integrative' assessment – she knows how to get a good mark on an essay so would not be comfortable with other forms of assessment
- One suggested that you could have fewer (presumably bigger) modules in the final year. This may suggest a sense of more integration by final year?

### 3.2 Focus Group 2 (Eng Literature)

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The following points were drawn from the students' discussion:

- Students mainly talked about their course in terms of skills e.g. critical analysis, creativity initially and only mentioned the subjects/topics covered when prompted.
- Skills were talked about in relation to transfer into employment.
- One student talked about 'feeling more like a graduate' as she was getting to grips with her course and the grades were improving.
- Choice of options can be about avoiding activities e.g. assessment by presentation.
- Students in this area noted that the different topics studied link together well and students were very enthusiastic about subjects; mentions of 'loving' this. Also talk about applying ideas outside of the course.
- Integration of topics was discussed and it was commented that in the first year they tended to see topics as 'different things' but in year 2 things had come together: 'we know more and we can apply things'. An aspect of this was perceived to be finding out what interests you.
- Students agreed that they 'hated exams'!

Students in this subject area raised issues and made the following specific comments relating to the problems of assessment of more than one module:

- Working on each module separately adds interest because they take different approaches to study of Literature.
- Some modules just don't link or overlap.
- You would be confused about what theories to use because different ones are applicable in different modules (topics).
- Timing: you might have to wait a long time before you do the assessment on a topic – that would be hard. You need to do the assessment whilst the stuff is still 'current in your mind'.

### 3.3 Focus Group 3 (Mechanical Engineering)

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The students in this subject area covered the following areas:

- The Mechanical Engineering students viewed their course very much as preparation for a specific profession. It gives you the knowledge you need but also the 'bit of paper'.
- Students mentioned a few 'skills' such as working to deadlines, group work, communication and problem-solving as being key to their course.
- Students noted that a graduate in this subject would need to have 'competence'.
- There appeared to be an aspect in students' perceptions of their subject as it being a 'hard' or 'proper' subject which would provide a certain status in the job market: people would know you were hard-working, for example.
- Students made a link between feeling like a graduate and the Honours element project. Students felt that 'you have to do it yourself – like the real world'.
- Hate coursework! (more than one person)
- In terms of coherence students noted that this was about using the knowledge gained from earlier modules in later years e.g. last year materials and manufacturing processes feeding into this year's design for manufacture. One student suggested that Design in years 1 and 2 should link together all the core modules but 'it hasn't really worked'.
- The dissertation/project was seen as a unifying influence, bringing things together. It was also viewed as an opportunity to 'follow your own interests'.
- Students noted that most of their assessment was by exams and they didn't overlap: you couldn't use the knowledge from one module in one of the other module exams and you had to learn/study for each one separately. Even within an exam you have to be able to do questions from each separate area (of the module)

Students in this subject area made the following specific comments relating to assessment of more than one module:

- It wouldn't work because the modules don't overlap.
- There would be too much to revise/cram at one time if you did this.
- It would be too much risk/stress having a big exam at the end (they assumed it would be an exam).

- You need to get feedback during the year and one larger assessment might limit feedback.

### 3.4 Discussion and outcomes to feed into the wider PASS project

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The following points are drawn from across the three focus groups:

1. Students don't appear to regard fragmentation of their programmes as a problem. This suggests that they may not welcome the introduction of programme level assessment and may consider that this would be unnecessary.
2. On the one hand students see their programmes as a 'collection of topics' but also have experience of coherence in the following ways:
  - a. Developing generic skills etc across the programme e.g. writing, critical analysis
  - b. Overlap of topics/themes /subjects throughout the degree. In Engineering there is seen to be a progressive accumulation of knowledge building through the degree and students felt that most topics were and should be progressively linked.
  - c. Integration of ideas and topics is what the individual student does through the work they do, mainly around assignments, 'finding their own pathway'. It may however not be helped by the structure: a student talked of feedback not being useful (ie transferable) as you'd never do that assignment again.
  - d. Applying ideas/theories/methods from one module into other parts of the programme.
3. The dissertation/project is seen as something special, both drawing from knowledge across the programme and a marker of 'being a graduate'. It is something you very much do yourself. In Engineering, the link between the dissertation and the 'real world' was mentioned.
4. 'Graduateness' is seen in relation to employment/employability. Related to generic knowledge/skills from across the programme rather than specific topics/modules. In Engineering, 'graduateness' is viewed as being a 'competence'.
5. Students see a lot of problems with assessing more than one module jointly, or at end of year. These include:
  - a. Who would mark the work?
  - b. How could varied topics be combined in one piece of work?
  - c. There might be confusion in a combined assessment about which theories or ideas to use because they are different for different modules.

- d. Big assignments give you no chance to improve on your mark – better to have a larger number of assignments over the year. You need feedback on your work during the year.
- e. It might be based on forms of assessment that the students are not used to which would be risky (because they are not the 'standard' type of essay they're used to).
- f. Concern that the variety between modules which students enjoy would be lost.
- g. Engineering students are mainly assessed by exam. They felt that different subjects could not be combined in exams because you can't use the knowledge from one subject (module) in another.
- h. Assessments might all be left to the end of year whereas you need the assessment while the topic is fresh in your mind. It would be very risky and stressful if left to end of year and there would be too much to revise all at once.

#### **4 Final comments**

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The detailed analysis provided above is drawn from a small data set. It is intended to provide a platform for the identification of particular issues that are generated from the student perception of programme assessment. Particular aspects of the issues raised above can be elaborated on: for example more detail of the data that generated these comments can be provided.

## 5 Appendix 1

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### 5.1 Focus group questions

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What do you think the aim of your course is?

What do you think the course is trying to teach you?

- Knowledge?
- Skills?
- Abilities?

What do you think a graduate in your subject area should be like?

- How would you describe someone who has graduated successfully from your subject area?
- Do you see yourself as a graduate of your area and what parts of the course have made you feel like that?

How many modules do you do?

- Can you tell us about the modules on your course?
- What is the ratio of optional modules to core modules?
- Why did you choose the optional modules that you did?
- What about the links between the modules?

How were you assessed in your modules?

(Examples: written exam, oral exam, presentation, essay, project work, poster, report, portfolio, etc.)

Did you think there was any overlap in your assessment?

- Was it the same type of assessment?
- Did it assess the same knowledge/skills/abilities?

How would you feel about having one assessment for several modules?

- Advantages?
- Disadvantages?

What type of assessment would you like?

- Would you like to have one set of assessments at the end of the course? (Oxford model)
- Would you like to have big assessments throughout the course (Capstone model) (Dissertation, exams, several projects).
- Would you like to have projects all the way through? (Danish university).

Are you doing a dissertation?

- Tell us about it and why you chose the topic.
- Is the dissertation drawing out skills from the modules you have done?
- Going back to the first question, do you think the dissertation is bringing out the skills you have acquired on the modules?