

Title: Engaging students through programme focused assessment

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Abstract:

Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Identify the main characteristics and potential value of Programme Focused Assessment (PFA).
- Compare a range of approaches to PFA and identify their typical impact on student engagement.
- Identify the main enablers and barriers which influence the development and implementation of PFA.
- Identify potential applications of PFA in their own context and institution.

Session Outline

The PASS (Programme Assessment Strategies) project was set up to directly confront issues which concern every course/programme leader in HE - see Chris Rust's Assessment Issues paper <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/wp3issues.pdf>. Programme-Focussed Assessment (PFA) provides a framework for such effective strategies by offering assessment that is specifically designed to address major programme outcomes rather than very specific or isolated components of the course. It follows then that PFA is integrative in nature, bringing together understandings of subject and skills in ways which represent key programme aims. As a result, the assessment is likely to be more authentic and meaningful to students, staff and external stakeholders.

The advantages of and main barriers to PFA will be illustrated by major case studies which PASS has investigated. These include a range of different approaches and show how PFA can address major criticisms of current HE practice. For example, Margaret Price et al (2011) bemoans the lack of "pedagogic, and particularly assessment, literacy" possessed by both academic staff and students. Comparing approaches to assessment, they suggest "an incremental approach focused at module/unit level provides an assessment experience that appears ready disaggregated to students, whereas a program/course focus enables an overview of assessment tasks and progression." That overview, coupled with the level of student understanding is a key component of effective PFA.

Following an initial presentation, analysis of examples and practical case studies will enable delegates to explore and discuss:

- What are the key features of PFA?
- What are the main forms of implementation?
- What is its impact on staff behaviour and student engagement?
- How does PFA change the 'student journey' through a programme of study?
- What are the practical and institutional implications of adopting PFA?
- What are the main enablers and barriers regarding effective PFA?

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

1. Introductory presentation (20 mins)

The presenters will review the main case studies that have emerged from the final year of the project and map these to a model that identifies the key features and impact of PFA.

2. Round table discussions (30 mins)

Each table will review one approach to PFA to identify issues and implications for delegates' own practice and their institutions. Comments will be recorded and participants will have the chance to comment on up to 3 approaches.

3. Plenary (40 mins)

Tables will report back their findings; these will then be considered alongside our summary of issues from the PASS case studies.

Summaries of the main points arising will be made available on the PASS website so that delegates can provide ongoing evaluation and continue to engage with the project after the session. Issues arising from the discussions will be used to inform the series of "Choice & Consequence" guides as one of the final outputs of the project.

References

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

Case studies from the PASS project can be found at <http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/>