

Number

01

COURSE FOCUSED ASSESSMENT



FUTURE
FACING
LEARNING

Associated Assessment and Feedback Policy Principles:

Each principle within the policy is explicitly positioned to advocate a course focused view of assessment, placing emphasis on the overall coherence and connectedness of learning outcomes and learning, teaching and assessment practices at the scale of the course.

Focus Questions

- Why take a course-view when thinking about assessment and feedback?
- In what ways is course-focused assessment related to student learning?
- How is course focused assessment effectively designed?

What do we know? Contemporary perspectives

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that assessment designed at the level of the programme or course determines student satisfaction and enhances learning ([Jessop, El Hakim, and Gibbs, 2014](#)). If staff and students are unable to see the links between elements of the course, and modules and their assessments are treated as a separate item, there may be no clear progression and coherence to the assessment experience ([Price, Carroll, O'Donovan and Rust, 2011](#)).

University of Bradford's [Programme Assessment Strategies \(PASS\)](#) project (2012) identified six common problems with the assessment of student /courses programmes in universities today: 1) Failure to ensure the assessment of the espoused programme outcomes; 2) Atomisation of assessment typically focusing on what is easiest to assess, neglecting to integrate and assess complex, higher-order (culminative) learning; 3) Students and staff failing to see the big picture in terms of the links within and across the course; 4) The design of modules is such that there is little time to focus and provide feedback on slowly learnt literacies and/or complex learning; 5) Students and staff overly focused on marks, engendering strategic approaches by students. 6) high-stakes summative assessment predominates, leading to overworked staff and limited scope

Practically, a course-focused view of assessment requires a strategic, collaborative and planned approach by course teams to carefully consider how the elements that comprise the student assessment experience support each other and are structured to help support students' attainment of course learning outcomes ([McDowell, 2012](#)). Course-focused assessment strategies actively recognise and accommodate the different purposes and approaches of assessment in higher education and arrange them so as to optimise its fitness for purpose. Such a course-focused view helps to frame curriculum and assessment design to fully consider the learning journey and experience of the student and to critically evaluate what needs to be assessed and how.

Assessment should be 'specifically designed to address major programme outcomes rather than very specific or isolated components of the course. It follows then that such assessment is integrative in nature, trying to bring together understanding and skills in ways which represent key programme aims [valid]. As a result, the assessment is likely to be more authentic and meaningful [relevant] to students, staff and external stakeholders'. ([Hartley and Whitfield, 2012](#)). A key challenge is finding ways of thinking about assessment that have the desired positive, consequential, influence on student learning for the long-term, not just relative to a single assessment task or module.

What can we do? Reviewing practice

Where there is a greater sense of the holistic course or programme, students are likely to achieve higher standards than on more fragmented programmes (see [Bearman et al. 2014](#)). Relatedly, Dublin Institute of Technology and University College Dublin identified the importance of what they call 'curriculum sequencing' which, they argue, has three core elements that should be factored into assessment design ([O'Neil, Donnelly and Fitzmaurice, 2014](#)).

- 1) Develop a collective philosophy – what is the course designed to achieve and how is this best achieved?
- 2) Communicating sequencing to students and staff – ensure that all staff teaching on the programme understand the relationships between modules and assessments and how the course/programme is meant to come together and be seen as an integrated whole.
- 3) Develop strong building blocks (modules and tasks) – which are clearly linked to ensuring the 'delivery' and assessment of the programme outcomes.

While there are inevitably disciplinary differences in what works when designing assessment at course level – meaning that one size clearly does not fit all – such an approach considers assessment and feedback holistically from the student point of view, seeking to ensure that the overall package a student experiences is manageable, coherent and fit-for-purpose ([Brown, 2015](#)).

The basic building blocks of courses at TU are 20 credit modules, each of which will have specified assessment tasks and criteria. The assessment tasks will lead to summative marks underpinned by feedback that supports learning. This approach does not change within a course focus. It is good practice to review the extent to which multiple summative assessment points are needed in a module. There is evidence that streamlining assessment into one integrative assessment task and carefully aligning the tasks which feed into the summative assessment can pay dividends in terms of staff time and student engagement (Jessop et al. 2014). One option is to consider including a combination of capstone and cornerstone (small capstone) modules – a capstone module is one that is explicitly intended to draw together and integrate, and assess that integration of, learning from preceding modules.

This has proven to be an effective strategy – see [Brunel University London's guide on Integrated Programme Assessment](#).

When designing assessment with a course focus, there are a few key aspects we might usefully consider when reviewing and enhancing our courses:

Think about the culminative effect of the individual assessment tasks and feedback at module level across a course of study, paying attention to how and when assessment and feedback occur.

What is the nature and balance of students' assessment diet on the course? What does the assessment landscape and experience look like – and is it fit for purpose? Steps need to be taken to minimise bunching of assessment deadlines, ensuring a variety of assessment tasks and opportunities for students' engagement with feedback (and feedforward) across modules and levels of study.

Carefully consider the balance of formative and summative assessment work and the sequencing of assessment types across the course. It is important that students are enabled to master required skills, learn from feedback and demonstrate intended learning outcomes in a variety of ways.

At a module level, consider the ways in which students will be supported to monitor the progress they're making towards learning outcomes, understand assessment criteria and standards, as well as ways to develop and improve their learning.

Useful Resources

Bearman, M., Dawson, P., Boud, D., Hall, M., Bennett, S., Molloy, E., & Joughin, G., (2014), *Guide to the Assessment Design Decisions Framework*, <http://www.assessmentdecisions.org/guide>

Boud, D. 2010. Assessment for Developing Practice. In J. Higgs, D. Fish I. Goulter, S. Loftus, J-A. Reid, and F. Trede (eds.) *Education for Future Practice*, (251–262). Rotterdam: Sense.

Jessop, T., El Hakim, Y. and Gibbs, G. (2014). [The whole is greater than the sum of its parts: a large scale student o students' learning in response to different programme assessment patterns](#). *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 39, Issue 1: pp. 73-88.

Price, M., Rust, C., O'Donovan, B., Handley, K. with Bryant, R. (2012) [Assessment literacy: the foundation for improving student learning](#), Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.