



Developing Resilient Pedagogies: Programme Approaches to Assessment

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In recent years there has been a growing interest in universities promoting a more holistic approach to assessment and feedback. A programme-focused approach can provide opportunities to support students so that they better understand how to move through their programme of study equipped with the skills needed to be self-regulated learners in both the present and the future.

DEFINING A PROGRAMME-FOCUSED APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT

That sounds great (or potentially scary depending on your views of assessment and feedback), but what does it actually mean? While many programme leaders and programme teams may already understand what a programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback is, in the context of this discussion, we may define it as:

- A curriculum design process in which we recognise that the 'whole is greater than the sum of its parts' (Jessop et al, 2014)
 - + Modules are not stand-alone units of learning, but are connected pieces of an overall learning journey.
 - + Assessment and feedback practices are structured so that students can make connections between current feedback and tasks in subsequent modules.
 - + Students are taught how to use the feedback they are given in useful and meaningful ways.

Trust me when I tell you I've heard programme-focused approaches defined in many ways, my favourite being a definition that all assessment and feedback was going to be handled, marked and decided by a specific team within a programme. That is, in fact, the opposite of what the programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback seeks to foster! Instead, here's what it is meant to do.

- **Allow programme teams to come together to create a roadmap for students.** This means that modules (or courses depending on where you come from), and the learning that happens on those modules, are connected. These connections are highlighted throughout the degree programme so that students know **how** and **why** the learning they are doing is important.
- **Create a degree programme jigsaw puzzle**, with all of the modules being pieces of the puzzle that fit together to create a magical photo of a kitten riding a unicorn over a rainbow, or in this case, an undergraduate or postgraduate degree in a specific discipline.
- **Enable a conversation** around not just the scheduling of assessments and classes, but how to link the skills covered across multiple modules, therefore linking all of the learning within the entire programme.

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A DEFICIENCY MODEL: BARRIERS TO A PROGRAMME-FOCUSED APPROACH

I have spent the last five years working with programmes at universities across Scotland, and people have not been shy about telling me why they do not want to move to a programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback. The first thing I usually hear from a reluctant programme team is that this approach to assessment and feedback is too time intensive. It takes a lot of work to map out an entire degree programme, with some of the methods like *Transforming the Experience of the Students Through Assessment* (or TESTA) suggesting that it takes upwards of three hours to complete a programme audit of just the assessment and feedback processes.

In addition to being time intensive, many colleagues foreground the logistical impracticalities of gathering as a team to have these discussions (Rust, 2017). This was the focus of Alex Buckley's discussion during the panel session. There are also issues of programme structures, optional courses, and satellite campuses to consider. There are always conversations about how much choice is too much choice, how feasible it would be to create the programme-focused approach given all the optional modules a student can choose from other disciplines, and whether it is worth utilizing the approach when there may be only one student on a specific pathway.

The last concern is that the nature of the programme-focused approach could set up false connections between the modules. Since this approach is about creating clear avenues through the programme, and helping students and staff to build connections between modules, there is an underlying assumption that those routes actually exist.

Utilizing the programme-focused approach means making the connections where they make sense and supporting team members in a way that works best for all involved. It is from this that we can continue to foster resilience in our programme teams and continue to support both staff and students in their university experience.

CURRENT ISSUES FOR EXPLORATION

Throughout the first iteration of this cluster and the meetings that we have had over the last few months, there have been some common concerns surrounding the role of the programme leader. One of the biggest concerns raised is that the programme leader role is often poorly defined. With no set job description, many acquire the role of programme leader with little or no idea of what the job entails, or exactly what is expected of the person fulfilling the role. Many are left to figure it out as they go. For many, there is no training for the role, no guidebook, and sometimes no chance to really sit down with a previous programme leader to have a conversation about the ins and outs of the job.

This lack of clear definition often means that programme leaders feel that they are given too much discretionary power, which creates a system whereby all decision-making falls onto their shoulders. This often means making decisions for the programme on the fly, without having the time and space to discuss it with the entire team.

Another issue that has been prevalent in our current discussions is the isolation and even the professional invisibility that programme leaders (and their teams) feel. Some of this centers on the nature of working remotely and literally being separated from your colleagues, and some of this relates to the lack of defined role and lack of defined team structure that creates a hierarchy with the programme leader as the 'all-knowing power' at 'the top of the pile'. Many programme leaders have said the team cohesion is an important part of team resilience.

The final issue that has been on the minds of programme leaders is the lack of formal recognition for the work that goes into the role. We know from recent work on academia and prestige (Lawrence & Ellis, 2017; Blackmore, 2016; Blackmore & Kandiko-Howson, 2011) that programme leaders do not fulfil this often burdensome administrative and pastoral role for remunerative gain, and it certainly rarely offers the kind of academic leadership that would be recognized for promotion or institutional recognition. Instead, a lot of the personal and individual reward within the role comes from the work that happens with their students (Ellis, 2018).

However, other than how students in their final year perceive their student experience through the narrow lenses of the NSS questions (Kandiko-Howson & Buckley, 2017), this work is often invisible and is difficult to measure. Programme leaders become invisible superheroes. Against a backdrop of numeric data, often used as a weapon against them, we suggest that programme leaders are in fact fighting back and defending themselves – unknowingly, perhaps, yet powerfully and effectively yielding impact in their role through the ways in which they are successfully coordinating, supporting, managing or mentoring others in relation to learning and teaching (AdvanceHE UKPSF D3.vii, 2011).

FOSTERING RESILIENCE: REPURPOSING THE PROGRAMME-FOCUSED APPROACH

How, then, do we make a programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback a tool for fostering resilience in a programme team? We can turn it into a tool that fights isolation, brings a team together, gives team members new opportunities, and decentralises hidden workloads placed on programme leaders. Prioritizing team cohesion and sharing the load is not just the outcome to the programme-focused approach, but also the method of making it happen.

- The programme-focused approach is no longer just about mapping and creating links between the assessments, but is now used as a tool for team building and support. Staff no longer work on their modules in isolation but can look to the team to help them as connections are made.
- Curriculum and module design become about co-creation and team cohesion, not just about mapping an assessment schedule. This offers the chance to discuss the best methods of assessment with the team and a way to introduce a variety of assessment tasks and types into a programme.
- Team cohesion encourages the sharing of good practice and allows the team to get the recognition they deserve for their effective practice. With team members working toward their strengths, and in regular communication with each other, it becomes easier to highlight and recognise the good work that takes place within the programme.

This does not mean that all modules will connect, or that all members of the team will work with each other. Utilizing the programme-focused approach means making the connections where they make sense and supporting team members in a way that works best for all involved. It is from this that we can continue to foster resilience in our programme teams and continue to support both staff and students in their university experience.



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