Lancaster University has five guiding principles for the design of effective assessment. These emphasise the need to develop holistic, programme-focused assessment strategies that can help tackle perennial issues arising from modularised curriculum and assessment.

What is integrative assessment?

‘Integrative assessment’ is assessment design that seeks to combine students’ learning from multiple modules and/or levels into a single assessment. Such assessments are synoptic, meaning that students are required to make connections between knowledge and learning that span multiple modules and topics. Integrative assessment strategies can thus enable students to demonstrate desirable higher order learning behaviours such as the application of knowledge and skills through analysis, synthesis and critical enquiry.

Importantly, integrative assessments enable students to demonstrate learning against programme level outcomes more readily than through atomised modular assessment regimes, enabling the evidencing of knowledge and understanding with breadth and depth of the subject.

Programme assessment strategies

The Programme Assessment Strategies (PASS) project examined instances of integrative assessment and.helpfully categorised approaches by the extent to which they addressed programme level outcomes.

Integrative semester/term assessment

Where students complete assessments that demonstrate how they satisfy programme learning outcomes specified for the term.

Integrative level/year assessment

Where students complete assessments that demonstrate learning against learning outcomes specified for the level/year of the programme (horizontal progression), or more than one level/year of the programme (vertical progression).

Final, heavily weighted integrative assessment

Where students complete a major part (not necessarily all) of the overall programme assessment strategy, evidencing programme learning outcomes and requiring the authentic application of knowledge and skills developed across the programme of study.

Assessment by submission of personal evidence against programme learning outcomes

In order to complete the programme, students must submit some form of capstone assessment (e.g. portfolio) which selectively draws on their learning from across the entire programme in order to evidence against programme level outcomes.
Why is integrative assessment important?

Conventional assessment regimes have been characterised by typically high summative / low formative assessment diets. For staff this has resulted in overload of marking and resource-intensive quality assurance processes. For students, the effect is that modular assignments and exam preparation is prioritised over broader integrative study, limiting the scope for students to make connections between modules and understand the coherency of the programme as a whole. (Jessop and Tomas, 2017)

Supporting student learning

Research into assessment in Higher Education has identified the value of programmatic assessment in supporting student learning. For instance, integrative assessment patterns have the scope to reduce the number of summative assessments, alleviating undesirable pressures on staff and students. Simultaneously, freeing up resources for formative feedback dialogue with students and sequencing of assessments that span modules. ([Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment project](#))

Congruence between programme- and module-level learning outcomes and assessment design is improved; supporting students to better understand how they are progressing, and better equipping them with skills of self-regulation for professional learning beyond the programme. (Boud and Soler, 2016)

Knight and Yorke (2003) observed that ‘complex learning is invariably slow learning, taking longer to grow than most modules last’. A potential outcome of integrative assessment is that it reduces both the volume and stakes for summative assessment earlier on in the learning journey.

This creates opportunities for students to learn from mistakes, to develop skills and understanding over time, and to generate dialogue between students and tutors about learning progress.

In examining the connections in curriculum, the evidence suggests that integrated assessment approaches are likely to improve the overall student experience by presenting curriculum as an integrated, holistic opportunity for students to engage with the overarching aims and intention of the programme. (Fung, 2017)

Quality considerations

In parallel to evidence that suggests holistic assessment patterns are beneficial to student learning, the revised Quality Code for Higher Education and associated guidance published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in 2018 also advocates for holistic assessment design, emphasising the overarching educational intention of the programme:

“Assessment is designed ‘top down’ - beginning with the award, then going down into module level (where appropriate). Assessment design considers all modes of course delivery and environment, including where employers may be involved in assessment for work-based learning programmes... Assessment design needs to develop across stages as the student develops, as well as levels of study, as part of the overarching award design process and on an ongoing basis.”

(QAA Quality Code for Higher Education: Assessment Advice and Guidance, p.5, November 2018)
Considerations for implementation

Designing new programmes or reviewing and making major revisions to existing provision present an ideal opportunity to consider how programme level assessment strategies are adopted, and that integrative assessment design methods are embedded. Consider doing so when engaging in the Annual Programme Review (APR) or periodic Course Reapprovals processes.

Work as a team

Introducing programme assessment strategies is not an individual endeavour and requires the engagement of the whole programme team. This is critical in order that module convenors can understand and influence the relationships between individual modules and the whole programme. It is therefore important that departments identify colleagues with oversight responsibly for programme leadership, and ensure that whole teams are invested in supporting programme level assessment design.

Rethink assessment effort

Investing effort in programme level curriculum and assessment design may yield workload benefits for teams – for instance, a direct efficiency if the overall number of modules and/or summative assessments reduces. Even where assessment-related workloads remain similar, the outcome may be that such work is rebalanced towards more productive feedback dialogue with students, or that assessment workloads are distributed differently.

Refresh the approach

Consider the introduction of ‘assessment modules’ at various levels of study. These may have utility in supporting integrative approaches across multiple modules and/or topics. Similar to existing major projects or dissertation modules (which typically occur at the end of study), such approaches have the potential to better support the student learning journey across parts of, or the whole programme (e.g. for Joint honours programmes). Other benefits would offer greater opportunity to observe progress in relation to Lancaster’s graduate attributes, and provide better information to staff and students about their progress to inform feedback in-between levels.

Talk to your students

Student engagement is paramount. Perennial issues with assessment and feedback reflected in the National Student Survey (NSS) results reveal that students’ experiences of assessment and feedback are not satisfactory. However, research into students’ interpretations of the NSS questions themselves reveal that multiple concerns are conflated within the results (Bennett and Kane, 2014). In order to inform effective change, it is essential to engage students to gain clear insight into how assessment regimes (especially across a whole programme) are actually perceived and experienced.

Be creative

Double-check assumptions about university regulations. There has been a considerable amount of work invested in ensuring that assessment regulations, whilst remaining robust, are also permissive of innovative and flexible programme focused assessment patterns.
Examples of integrative assessment

Examples of integrative assessment methods may include: Major projects; Patchwork assignments; Capstone portfolios; Employer-led design projects; Synoptic exams. The following are some selective case studies of integrative assessment in practice.

There are several examples of integrative programme-level initiatives at Lancaster, with case studies available from the ‘What Works? Assessment and Feedback Practice’ site. These include:

- An example that demonstrates effective sequencing and assessment literacy development. (MA in Human Resources and Consulting)
- A module to support students to self-assess and track their discipline skills development (Chemistry), spanning two years and assessed by online portfolio.
- Achieving Department-wide engagement to review and refresh assessment approaches across cognate programmes. (Mathematics and Statistics)

References and further information


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v2 updated August 2021