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Do students see the benefits? An exploratory study of undergraduate accounting students' perceptions of a programme focussed assessment



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ABSTRACT

Degree programme modularisation is popular to develop degree pathways, student choice and economic use of resources. Modularisation has been criticised for its potential to create disjointed learning environments and assessment limitations. Programme Focussed Assessment (PFA) describes an assessment process based on measuring students' attainment of multiple programme level learning outcomes. While the literature describes benefits associated with PFA such as improving student satisfaction, student confidence, assessment validity, pedagogy, feedback, student reflection and motivation, there is relatively little research of students' perceptions about PFA. This paper reports on an exploratory study which investigated the perceptions of students undertaking PFA at the end of Year 1 of an Accounting and Finance Degree. The study found students had positive perceptions about some of the claimed benefits of PFA. However, other findings were more ambiguous. The paper examines the findings from students' and institutional perspectives and concludes with a set of recommendations for practice.

1. Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education provides a library of Subject Benchmarking Statements (QAA, 2015). Academic institutions can use these statements as the start point for designing degree programmes with defined educational aims, an explicit curriculum and holistic programme learning outcomes, which are statements of what a learner should know, understand and be able to exhibit at the end of the degree programme. The QAA expects that degree-awarding institutions will ensure qualifications are awarded only where programme learning outcomes are demonstrated through an assessment that meets appropriate standards (QAA, 2015). Programme Focussed Assessment (PFA) is characterised by the appraisal of students' attainment of programme level learning outcomes, rather than the achievement of study module learning outcomes. The literature describes possible institutional motivations for implementing PFA and the likely benefits for students. However, there appears to have been only limited study of the perceptions of students undertaking PFA.

In 2016 a Business School at a British university implemented PFA for an undergraduate accounting degree programme. There were two goals for this initial stage of PFA. Firstly, to learn how to create a PFA, where students' overall attainment could be measured against the programme's learning outcomes. This work was influenced by the UK Programme Assessment Strategies ((PASS Project 2012)), which offers advice on the methodology for assessing programme level outcomes at many stages during and at the end

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Table 1
A outcomes described in the literature.

PFA could improve:	Sources
1 Assessment of programme learning outcomes	(Jessop, El-Hakim, & Gibbs, 2014; McDowell, 2012; PASS Project Report, 2012; Turner & Baskerville, 2013)
2 Student satisfaction	(McDowell, 2012; Jessop et al., 2014.)
3 Validity and appropriateness of assessment	(Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, & Brown, 2014; Guilkers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004; Rust, 2002; Tummons, 2010)
4 Pedagogy	(Beattie, Collins, & McInnes, 1997; Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001; Bok et al., 2013; Boyce, Williams, Kelly, & Yee, 2001; Donnison & Penn-Edwards, 2012; Knight & Yorke, 2003; McDowell, 2012; PASS, 2012; Rust, 2002; Scouller & Prosser, 1994; Scouller, 1998; Wynn-Williams, Beatson, & Anderson, 2016)
5 Feedback and students' self-reflection	(Amundson, 2006; Grohnert, Beausaert, & Segers, 2014; Maree, Ebersöhn, & Molepo, 2006)
6 Students' motivation	(Rust, 2002; Svinicki, 2004)
7 Relevance and preparation for employment	(Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Boud, 2000; Knight & Yorke, 2003; Yorke & Knight, 2006)
8 Student retention	(Yorke, 2001) Subject to a parallel study.
9 Institutional financial efficiency	(Knight, 2000) Subject to a parallel study.

of academic programmes (Jessop & Tomas, 2016, pp. 1–10; PASS, 2012). Secondly, the intention was to provide students with pedagogic opportunities to integrate and deploy some of their accountancy knowledge and skills using real-life data presented in case study form. This exploratory study aimed to back further PFA development work within the institution as well as contributing to the PFA literature by investigating the impact of PFA on students' perceptions of its claimed benefits of improved satisfaction, confidence, preparedness, assessment validity, pedagogy, feedback, reflection and motivation.

This paper first reviews the literature about the proposed benefits ascribed to PFA, which provides a structure for investigating students' perceptions. The next section describes the research methodology and how the opinions of the sample of undergraduate accounting students using PFA were examined. Finally, the findings are presented and discussed leading to some general practice recommendations.

2. Literature review

Table 1 summarises the range of potential benefits ascribed to PFA as described in the literature. As this paper is about students' perceptions of PFA, potential outcomes associated with specific institutional issues such as student retention and financial efficiency are not considered further.

2.1. Assessing programme learning outcomes

Subject modularisation of degree programmes is a popular and widespread design technique to provide a clear and bounded structure, programme pathways, subject optionality, student choice, ease of administration and economic use of resources. Typically, all modules will contain one or more formative and summative assessments using a range of techniques to evaluate student performance, attainment and capability. The perspective of the literature and accompanying developments in the past twenty years has shifted from considering assessment, not only as a tool to determine grades by assessing knowledge and skills but as a device to provide feedback to students and tutors about learning outcomes and use of the assessment process itself as a learning mechanism. Assessment is described in the literature as a comprehensive multi-faceted educational process which has the power to affect all stages of the learning process. Also, such assessment must be considered in the context of measured institutional quality which is visible at a national level (Bok et al., 2013; Scouller, 1998; Van Der Vleuten et al., 2012; Watering, Gijbels, Dochy, & Rijt, 2008).

Modularisation of degree programmes has been criticised for creating the potential for disjointed learning environments which focus solely on modular learning outcomes, at the expense of inter-module linkages and programme level skills (Bloxham, Boyd, Chesney, Ginty, & Nuttall, 2007, pp. 157–175; Boud & Molloy, 2013). In practice, the importance of such concerns may be relatively hidden from view as students perceive a greater need to focus on the specific immediate needs of study modules and their assessment activities (Jessop et al., 2014; Maas & Leauby, 2005). Additionally, there are concerns that in a modular assessment environment, students are likely to devote a significant part of their study time preparing for and undertaking formative and summative modular assessments (Harland, Mclean, Wass, & Miller, 2015). Modular assessment may leave students with little time for broader learning experiences or development of programme level learning outcomes (Jessop & Tomas, 2016, pp. 1–10; Price, Carroll, & O'Donovan, 2011). In this context, accounting curricula have been criticised for placing too much emphasis on solving simple small problems within discrete learning modules. Such an approach may sacrifice the broader development of cognitive processes and other learning outcomes such as critical thinking and reasoning, which are often expressed as professional characteristics of accountants (Somers, Passerini, Parhankangas, & Casal, 2014).

There are arguments that a PFA approach clarifies (for students) the interconnectedness of study modules, provides better focus on the more holistic development of cognitive skills and reduces the amount of time spent on assessment activities (Bloxham, Boyd, Chesney, Ginty, & Nuttall, 2007, pp. 157–175; Boud & Molloy, 2013; PASS, 2012). It is implicit that programme learning outcomes are hierarchically related to detailed underlying learning outcomes (LO) for each, often modularised component of a degree

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