The integrative curriculum – using synoptic assessment to support the achievement of programme learning outcomes (0329)

Rebecca Lees
Kingston University, UK

Context

With many higher education courses now following a modular structure, ensuring students are meeting their programme learning outcomes has become the subject of some scrutiny in recent years. Additional demands of meeting accrediting body requirements has further emphasised this issue. At the research site, the Business School is seeking American Association of Colleges and Business School (AACSB) accreditation, and their requirement to ensure programme learning outcomes are met has prompted one module leader to reconsider her assessment strategy.

Programme-focused assessment

Programme-focused assessment goes by several names in the literature including integrative, synoptic and inter-module assessment, but essentially represents assessment that is specifically designed to address stage, or programme-level learning outcomes that bring together the subject knowledge and skills to meet the programme aims (Nicol and McFarlane-Dick, 2006; Smith, Luque and Wilson, 2012). This approach is likely to be more authentic and meaningful to students (Hartley and Whitefield, 2011), encourage deep learning (Smith, 2012), help them to make connections between modules and increase student engagement (Gorra, Lazarevski and Campbell, 2007) although examples in the literature are limited. Rodway-Dyer, Burkhil and Sjerps-Jones (2012) comment that whilst there is a 'scope and a demand to further develop interdisciplinary activities within HE' (2012:p13) there is a general lack of evidence within the higher education arena of the use of programme-focused assessment. Hughes, Smith and Creese (2014) suggest that the during the modularisation process within UK higher education that enabled greater choice of pathways and flexibility to learners, the focus on programme goals may have been lost through the introduction of more explicit assessment criteria and detailed programme and module specifications.

Despite the perceived benefits of programme-focused assessment strategies, the literature lists several barriers including the prevalence of a modular approach to degree course composition, where many subjects are delivered in isolation rather than in conjunction with others on one particular course. Since many academics new to HE have achieved their degrees at institutions delivering such a structure, it can be difficult for them to develop a programme-focused approach requiring a creative, team effort that is outside their usual working patterns (Price et al., 2014).

The integrative/synoptic assessment approach
This paper focuses on a novel, joint assessment strategy employed by leaders of two modules on a Marketing programme which sit in different departments. Students on the first year of the Marketing Management or Marketing, Communications and Advertising degree programmes are required to take core modules in Marketing Principles (sitting with the Marketing, Strategy and Innovation department) and Managing Marketing Information (residing within Accounting, Finance and Informatics). Traditionally, each module is taught independently of each other, and although a recent curriculum redesign ensured that subjects across the first year of the programme were reasonably aligned and shared programme learning goals, there has never been any integration of assessment.

For several years, the Marketing Principles module has used a New Product Development project as its main assessment vehicle that facilitated students achievement of the module learning outcomes focused on the acquisition of marketing subject knowledge. Meanwhile, the Managing Marketing Information module focuses largely on practical computer based skills, including database, spreadsheet and web communication tools, along with business statistical and analytical skills. Historically, students have been provided with industry data to develop their analytical and programming skills.

With a focus on enabling students to achieve the programme learning outcome that interrelates the marketing function with other functional areas in an organisation, in the 2014/5 academic year, the teaching teams designed an integrative strategy they hoped would engage students in the assessment generally as well as enable them to see the links in data collection and analysis and application to a given market to further develop their skills as marketers. This approach used the new product concept developed in the Marketing Principles course as the vehicle to learn and demonstrate their web communications skills in the Managing Marketing Information module, through the development of a website to promote their product. Students were required to undertake the full website planning process to ensure their set of pages were appropriate for the target market, type of product, type of website (eg: service, information provision or sales) and used relevant calls-to-action to enable their audience to engage with their site. The students could then use their websites as part of the presentation element in the Marketing Principles assessment to summarise their product.

Findings and Discussion
Results on both modules show marginal improvements of three to four percentage points in the related coursework in the 2014/5 academic year compared to previous years, as well as improvements in the engagement with the assessments. Student

feedback via an end-of-teaching survey included comments such as '*It felt like less of a work load and I noticed more students were motivated to actually do the work as the two were closely linked and facilitated the flow of ideas between modules*'. Whilst the teaching team agreed that the cohort was better engaged, they do concede that this approach would be difficult to develop across modules with different student registrations, as noted by Smith et al., (2012) who comment that programme-focused assessment is 'easiest to implement in self-contained courses with no shared teaching' (2012:p1). The holistic nature of the assignment required students to demonstrate their understanding of the interrelation of information systems, web communications and marketing strategy and thus supported the attainment of the intended programme learning outcome.

Conclusion and future developments
The teaching team on both modules consider this initial foray into integrative assessment as a success and plan to develop the strategy further in the next academic year. This will include the collection of primary research on given markets which will be assessed for question structure, planning and analysis, further pricing simulation modelling and repeated use of the website development, which will be assessed through construction and application on the Managing Marketing Information module and contextualisation and application to the product and its market within Marketing Principles with the hope that the tentative success achieved in 2014/5 will result in further improvements in engagement and performance in subsequent years.

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