



Quality assuring innovative assessment practice

A QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project



Programme-level assessment: a review of the current landscape.

Dr Hazel McCafferty, Professor Anna Barney and Professor Simon Walker

October 2025



Introduction

This research was undertaken as part of the Collaborative Enhancement Project, ‘Equal standards: how should we quality assure innovative assessment practice?’. The overall aim of this project was to explore and further develop quality standards and assurance models for flexible assessment, with a particular focus on programme-level assessment and optionality. This work responded to growing interest across the sector in moving beyond strictly modular systems, recognising the challenges this poses for regulatory frameworks, business processes, and institutional cultures that are currently designed around modular assessment structures.

Desk-based review

This desk-based review investigated peer-reviewed literature on the topic of programme-level assessment both nationally (within the United Kingdom) and internationally. Its overarching aim was to understand the current landscape of programme-level assessment. Specific objectives included: learning more about the nature of programme-level assessment; how assignments and their associated output were quality assured; and how students were supported to meet progression standards.

As the research proceeded, additional questions formed about programme-level assessment, such as:

- Who are its leading proponents?
- How does it work in practice?
- What are its benefits?
- Can all disciplines legitimately apply programme-level assessment?
- What are the barriers to its implementation?
- How sustainable is it?
- How do students receive programme-level assessment?
- What are the necessary steps and resources for its implementation?

Paper outline

This paper begins with a brief outline of the research methodology for the literature review. It then moves on to describe the themes which were developed as a result of this research. These include the potential benefits of programme-level assessment, its definitions and associated language as well as its implementation.

Summary of learning

Overall, it was found that:

- Assessment in higher education remains an area which needs improvement in practice.
- Programme-level assessment can have several benefits including increased learner agency.



- A spectrum of approaches towards programme-level assessment exists from a basic mapping of existing assessment practice to fully programmatic approaches based on the Ottawa Principles (see Appendix 2, for a list of the principles in full).
- For programme-level assessment to be implemented, teams need a clear vision of their purpose in relation to learning and the core of their subjects.
- Programme-level assessment requires allocated resources such as investment in training for staff and students as well as in systems and regulations for learning and data collection.

Methodology

The content of this literature review was gathered between May 2025 and September 2025. The aim of this initial desk-based research was to find and summarise papers about programme-level assessment.

A range of search terms were used, and included:

- Programme-level assessment
- Program-level assessment
- Integrated programme assessment
- Integrated assessment
- Integrative assessment
- Programme focussed assessment
- Systemic assessment
- Programme level learning outcomes
- Programmatic assessment
- Synoptic assessment
- Longitudinal approach
- Program-based assessment
- Part-programme level
- Curriculum wide
- Course-level assessment
- Embedded assessments

In particular, the researchers sought to find journal articles with *empirical* evidence of programme-level assessment in practice. However, opinion pieces were included to reflect both the emergent nature of the topic, but also in recognition of subject expertise within the field. Sources of articles included data-base searches (including university bibliographic databases as well as Google Scholar) and snowballing approaches from contacts made (e.g. from colleagues in the Advancing Assessment Project at the University of Southampton). Further journal articles were found by utilising key words and associated article links on publisher websites and by following citation chains in relevant articles and presentations.



In total 32 pieces of research relating to programme-level assessment were found, ranging in date from 2000 to 2025. Of these, 29 could be retrieved in full and were included in the review. Once the journal articles had been retrieved, they were read fully and summarised. Notes were made as to their purpose, location of data collection, methodology and key outcomes. These outcomes were then thematically analysed both deductively (in relation to the research questions posed by the project), but also inductively to move beyond any pre-existing conceptions of integrated assessment (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Background

29 papers ranging in date from 2000 – 2025 contributed to the contents of this review. Most of the papers were produced in Australia, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, but practice was also identified in Canada, Ireland and the United States of America. 17 of the papers included empirical data.

As a result of the analysis, eight themes were created:

1. Context and benefits
2. Defining programme-level assessment - a spectrum of approaches
3. Recommendations for implementation
4. Quality assurance
5. Resources
6. Student experience
7. Staff experience
8. Enablers and barriers

The remainder of this paper will describe each of these in detail.

Theme 1: context and benefits

Several of the papers argued that assessment within higher education has repeatedly been identified as an area in need of improvement, especially as assessment so often drives student learning (Boud and Falchikov, 2006; Charlton and Newsham-West, 2022; Jessop, El Hakim and Gibbs, 2013; Walker, 2025). Despite the importance of assessment, when programmes are designed, they are often teaching and content driven with assessment as an afterthought (Charlton and Newsham-West, 2022). Most commonly, academic staff rely on traditional forms of assessment such as essays and examinations, which means that students experience a limited range of assessment practices (Boud and Falchikov, 2006; Jessop and Tomas, 2016). Concerningly, feedback is often delivered in a perfunctory manner and in such a way that students tend not to apply learning to future assignments (Boud and Falchikov, 2006). Often, students are treated as the subjects of assessment, rather than being actively engaged as agents of their own learning. This



runs counter to the potential needs of future learning and employment, where students and graduates may be expected to act with increasing autonomy.

Some argue that although credit accumulation and transfer systems were introduced for well-meaning reasons, they have in fact acted to further fragment learning for students (Baartman and Quinlan, 2023). Modularised programmes have led to programme design becoming increasingly individualistic, with academic staff more commonly focussed on their subjects, rather than the whole programme (Jessop and Tomas, 2016). Students often experience their curricula as a set of increasingly fragmented modules, with tasks which they need to pass to move on, rather than engaging with deeper learning (Charlton and Newsham-West, 2024b). Advocates of programme-level assessment suggest that it counters this fragmentation, by rejecting organic and individualistic development of assessment and replacing it with the deliberate construction of assessment across a whole programme.

This review suggests that programme-level assessment can have several key benefits. Some of these relate to student agency and assessment literacy as follows:

- Programme-level assessment affords the opportunity for knowledge to be developed sequentially (Charlton and Newsham-West, 2024a).
- Rather than hopping between modules, students learn to ‘feedforward’, applying their learning to future studies and becoming more confident to make judgements about their academic performance and progression (Baartman, Schilt-Mol and Van der Vleuten, 2022; Charlton and Newsham-West, 2024a).
- Students build on their own knowledge, ideally becoming more self-directed and self-evaluative throughout their studies and more able to see connections between their assessments (Charlton and Newsham-West, 2024b; Jessop, El Hakim and Gibbs, 2013).
- Students can potentially engage in more rapid development by learning from mistakes during low-cost assignments (Walker, 2025).

Universities which participate in programme-level assessment have been shown to be more broadly engaged with their assessment practices; overall, they have recognised assessment as core to learning and placed it front and centre in their curriculum planning (Baartman, Schilt-Mol and Van der Vleuten, 2022). Some have noted the significant role which programme-level assessment plays in creating more variety in assessment (Baartman, Schilt-Mol and Van der Vleuten, 2022). Such variety may have benefits for future professional development and competence, as students can engage in assessments with greater relevance outside the academic, gaining a broader range of skills as they do so (Bok et al, 2013; Charlton and Newsham-West, 2024a).



Theme 2: defining programme-level assessment - a spectrum of approaches

Programme-level assessment has been described variously, but perhaps is helpfully summarised by Charlton and Newsham-West (2024b) as:

'the strategic placement of individual assessment items within the program in a holistic way to provide students with a clear assessment purpose to support their sequential development of knowledge and skills' p. 1075.

The literature in this review represents a range of approaches to programme-level assessment from the adoption of lighter touch models utilising matrices and mapping tools to audit current assessment practices and diversify practice (Brunton et al, 2016) through to whole system models described as programmatic assessment (Dean et al, 2023; Heeneman et al, 2021; Ryan and Judd, 2021; Torre et al, 2021). This spectrum of approaches has been summarised in Figure 1 below.

PLA: a spectrum of approaches

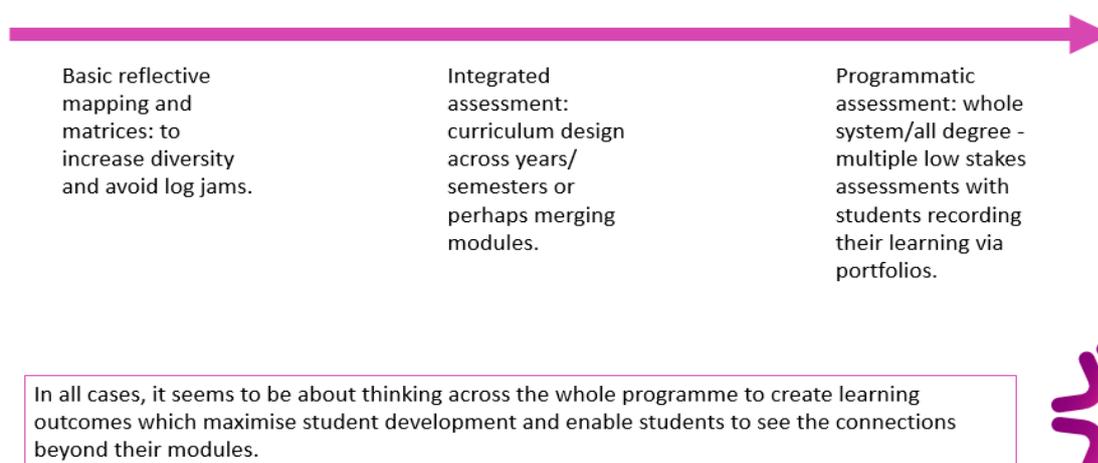


Figure 1: PLA a spectrum of approaches

Currently, many examples of programmatic assessment are from the Netherlands, (19 universities were recorded as practising programmatic models of assessment in 2025; Baartman et al, 2025).

Programmatic assessment is an entirely different approach than traditionally designed modularised degree programmes (Heeneman et al, 2021). Based on 12 principles (see Appendix 2), programmatic assessment is built on constructivism, where students are agents of their own



progression and expected to increasingly self-direct their learning throughout their degrees. Fundamental to this approach is the introduction of multiple and varied methods of assessments which act as datapoints towards a final decision taken by a committee. In this approach each programme has a core or backbone of learning. Programme teams act as coaches enabling their students to build portfolios of evidence with a range of assessments or datapoints often recorded in a digitalised format.

Theme 3: recommendations for implementation

Several authors made recommendations as to how programme-level assessment might be implemented. Overall, it was deemed essential to achieve a clear vision about both the purpose and value of programme-level assessment, including its benefits for student learning (Jamieson et al, 2017; Torre et al, 2021). The importance of collegiality and collaboration throughout the process was highlighted by several papers (Baartman and Quinlan, 2023; Hudson, 2010; Hughes, 2012). Some encouraged the involvement of multiple actors including employers, professional bodies, student support services and senior management to ensure that not only are regulations reformulated and adhered to, but also that programme coherence, creativity and relevance to employability were secured (Baartman and Quinlan, 2023; Hudson, 2010).

Taken together the papers' contents can be seen as a series of steps which are outlined below.

Step 1: Reflect on current practice.

Describing a process of introducing programme-level assessment to a placement, Jamieson et al (2017) found it invaluable to begin with a reflection activity which enabled academic colleagues to openly express their opinions of and frustrations with current assessment systems. Importantly, this established and signalled a readiness for change within the group.

Step 2: Establish core competencies.

Several authors identified the need to be clear on the core competencies or the 'backbone' of the course (Baartman and Quinlan, 2023; Baartman, Schilt-Mol and Van der Vleuten, 2022; Jamieson et al, 2017; Van der Vleuten et al, 2014). Some recommended that the voices of employers and professional bodies should be included at this stage (Van der Vleuten et al, 2014). Charlton and Newsham-West's (2024b) suggested that large capstone projects which are often situated at the end of courses might serve as a useful direction of travel for establishing essential course content.

Step 3: Design assessment.

Once the core competencies have been established, Baartman and Quinlan (2023) suggest that a detailed mapping of the programme needs to take place, where multiple opportunities for assessment in many forms is established.



Step 4: Identify key resources.

With data collected at multiple points, consideration needs to be given to how it will be collected, stored and shared. Investment in digital portfolios may prove essential as well as systems for coaching, mentoring and final examination (Van der Vleuten et al, 2014).

Theme 4: quality assurance

Most of the evidence about quality assurance came from authors with experience of programmatic assessment. In line with the Ottawa principles (Heeneman et al, 2021; Appendix 2), institutions applying programmatic assessment provide continuous and meaningful feedback to students, suggesting that there are no final assessment shocks (Torre et al, 2021). In this approach there is a recognition that single assessment data points are flawed, consequently the quality systems rely on the collation of multiple and varied datapoints often via digital portfolios (de Jong et al, 2019; Van der Vleuten et al, 2012). The authors argue that multiple data points of assessment by many assessors over several timepoints makes the assessment more rigorous. Here the concept of saturation is important (de Jong et al, 2019), that is to say that if sufficient data is provided by the student about their work in the form of multiple types of assessment then highly meaningful conclusions can be made about their overall academic performance.

Final high stakes decisions are made by holistic committees (Baartman, Schilt-Mol and Van der Vleuten, 2022). Quality in the final evaluations is ensured by the training of examiners, committee size and expertise, and consistent access to documentation such as assessment datapoints and supporting rubrics (Torre et al, 2021; Van der Vleuten et al, 2012).

Studies have shown that for most students, the decisions made by the committees are as expected and their results straightforward and uncontested (Baartman and Quinlan, 2023; Torre et al, 2021). However, some have shown that it can prove difficult to aggregate data from multiple, subjective and qualitative sources for 'high-stakes decisions'. This seemed especially the case when high marks were not substantiated by high quality feedback (Baartman, Schilt-Mol and Van der Vleuten, 2022).

Theme 5: resources

Many of the papers commented on the need for investment in training, processes and recording systems if programme-level assessment was to be introduced successfully. Training was required for both staff and students to understand the range of assessment types and how to manage them (Brunton et al, 2016; Van der Vleuten et al, 2012). Committees needed support to both understand datapoints and see their connections with overall programme learning outcomes and, in some cases, professional body requirements (Torre et al, 2021).

Programme-level assessment tends to generate diverse types of assessment over multiple time periods, and this needs to be captured (Baartman and Quinlan, 2023). Digital portfolios are often chosen to do this as they enable learners to capture their work in more diverse ways and academics and assessors to access this learning as necessary (Baartman and Quinlan, 2023). Digital portfolios



can be advantageous as they can include traffic light systems which enable learners to more immediately reflect on their progress to date, as well as reflecting on their future learning trajectory (Dean et al, 2023). Torre et al (2021) found that of the 15 healthcare programmes in their study the majority used e-portfolios, they concluded that an investment in software was a key enabler for programme-level assessment.

Theme 6: student experience

There was limited empirical evidence about the student experience of programme-level assessment, which reflected its relatively new status. However, where evidence was gathered it showed programme-level assessment to have some advantages for learning. Students took increased ownership of their learning as their degrees progressed (Baartman, Schilt-Mol and Van der Vleuten, 2022). There was also evidence of high levels of engagement with assessments, with some students completing 19% more assessments than were necessary throughout their studies (Dean et al, 2023). Schellekens et al (2024) found that first-year students enrolled in a programmatic assessment programme in the Netherlands perceived the assessment as significantly more positive than second-year students engaged in more traditional assessment patterns. In contrast, the non-programmatic students were more critical of their assessments as they saw them as being about passing tests, with little application of their learning to future or authentic tasks.

However, some students identified negative experiences. At times, students struggled to collect sufficient evidence for portfolios, this was particularly compounded on busy placements (Baartman, Schilt-Mol and Van der Vleuten, 2022). Furthermore, although students were encouraged to see low-stakes assignments as an opportunity for risk-taking, in practice students saw all their marked work as high-stakes and so were often less likely to take the type of risks expected by academic staff (Baartman, Schilt-Mol and Van der Vleuten, 2022).

Theme 7: staff experience

Staff experience of programme-level assessment was mixed. Some described a sense of loss and concern that their academic autonomy would be undermined as their courses were designed by committee. However, others embraced the opportunity to learn more about assessment. They increasingly saw their role as one of coaching (Baartman, Schilt-Mol and Van der Vleuten, 2022). (This being more akin to academic tutor roles in the UK.) Importantly, Schut et al (2020) found that when teachers saw their role as enabling learners to reflect and find patterns in their own learning, they took more joy from partnering with students. This was especially the case when assessment practices were more aligned with relevant and real-life experiences.

Theme 8: barriers and enablers

Despite its apparent benefits some have argued that the adoption of programme-level assessment has been relatively slow in some countries (Charlton and Newsham-West, 2024b; Charlton, Weir and Newsham-West, 2022; Tree, Harvey and Rand-Weaver, 2025). Torre et al (2021) argue that full implementation can take years, and not months, requiring strong leadership and well-designed



plans and finance. Some have found that where there is implementation it tends to be done by lone innovators, rather than more universally embraced. Items which act against the widespread implementation of programme-level assessment have been summarised below.

Barriers

- Lack of centralised policies which inhibit the adoption of programme-level assessment practices.
- Quality policies which include restrictive assessment strategies attached to modules.
- Low levels of assessment literacy, especially when academics have limited access to high quality training in pedagogic practices.
- Opposition from colleagues who prefer a more traditional approach to assessment.
- Resistance from colleagues who prefer to focus more specifically on their own modules and their development and teaching.
- Programme ownership, where modules are potentially the property of different courses or departments.
- Academic workload which prevents innovation, especially in trimester systems with limited downtime.
- Requirements of professional and regulatory bodies which at times demand single high-stakes examinations.
- Fears about increased bureaucracy, especially within systems which have been traditionally modularised.

(Baartman, Schilt-Mol and Van der Vleuten, 2022; Charlton and Newsham-West, 2024a; Charlton and Newsham-West, 2024b; Torre et al, 2021; Tree, Harvey and Rand-Weaver, 2025; Van der Vleuten et al, 2012; Walker, 2025)

Where programme-level assessment had been adopted, several enablers were identified:

Enablers

- Collaboration from academics to enable rich learning.
- Support from professional services such as education design teams.
- Effective leadership from colleagues who understand education and curriculum design in depth.
- Backing from senior leadership.
- Investment in software.
- Investment in design and development.

(Charlton and Newsham-West, 2024b; Jamieson et al, 2017; Torre et al, 2021; Walker, 2025)



Conclusion

Assessment practices within higher education require improvement. The modularisation of courses has led to increasingly fragmented approaches to learning. Programme-level assessment would allow assessment to be constructed across whole degrees. This could enable learning to be developed more sequentially. If programme-level assessment is to be adopted, then a collegiate approach needs to be taken by multiple actors within universities. Academic staff, university managers and administrators, learning developers, students, employers and professional bodies all need to understand how programme-level assessment might be adopted and work towards systems which would support this.

The review identified several barriers which act to constrain the implementation of programme-level assessment including resources, but also perceptions of business and quality systems. Whilst academic colleagues might identify a need to change their assessment practices, they also acknowledged conflicting priorities and in particular time constraints as acting against change. There is some evidence that further investment in technical eco-systems is needed. For example, digital portfolios with appropriate software to support marking and decision-making processes.

What next?

Currently, the Netherlands has led the adoption of programmatic assessment. However, there are pockets of emergent practice in other countries. In the United Kingdom, several funded projects and networks have been initiated, which suggests a growing interest in the topic. Whilst in Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA,) has mandated a transition to a more systemic approach, requiring universities to implement assessment strategies that span entire programmes of study rather than focusing solely on individual modules or units (Lodge et al, 2023). There is also evidence that whilst programmatic assessment emerged from health disciplines, other disciplines are considering whether and how they might make use of programme-level assessment principles.



Appendix 1 – language associated with programme-level assessment.

Topic area	Example (search) terms
Programme Level Assessment	Program-level assessment Integrated Programme Assessment Integrated Assessment Integrative Assessment Programme Focussed Assessment Systemic Assessment Programme Level Learning Outcomes Programmatic Assessment Synoptic assessment Longitudinal approach Program-based assessment Part-programme level Curriculum wide Course-level assessment Embedded assessments
Assessment	Development points/milestones Datapoints Guidance Milestones Progression reviews Stage-gates Capstones
Portfolios	Evidence Artefacts Trajectories Learning journey
Associated terms	Onboarding High-risk/low-risk assessment Peer-review Mentoring/coaching Mastery/proficiency Curriculum maps



Appendix 2- The 'Ottawa' Principles for programmatic assessment

12 principles for programmatic assessment

1. *Every part of an assessment is but a datapoint.*
2. *Every datapoint is optimised by giving meaningful feedback to the learner.*
3. *Pass/fail decisions are not given on a single data point.*
4. *This is a mixed method of assessment.*
5. *The method chosen should depend on the educational justification for using that method.*
6. *The distinction between summative and formative is replaced by a continuum of stakes.*
7. *Decision-making on learner progress is proportionally related to the stake.*
8. *Assessment information is triangulated across data-points.*
9. *High-stake decisions are made in a credible and transparent manner, using a holistic approach.*
10. *Intermediate review is made to discuss and decide with the learner on their progression.*
11. *Learners have recurrent learning meetings with mentors/coaches using a self-analysis of all assessment data.*
12. *Programmatic assessment seeks to gradually increase the learner's agency and accountability for their own learning.*

(Heeneman et al, 2021)



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