Session title: Balancing student assessment loads: A critical re-evaluation of programme assessment strategy

Session type: Lightening talk (10 mins)

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Session summary:
This talk discusses the challenges associated with high assessment loads across programmes, and how they have been exacerbated in recent times, particularly during the pandemic, due to further segmenting of summative assessment structures. These issues stem from weaknesses in program assessment strategies, which are understudied. The talk unpacks these issues and brings to light the need for a framework that considers disciplinary context, and student and staff input to improve current practices and address shortcomings.

Session outline:
Modular structures in degree programmes offer several advantages but receive recurring criticism since their introduction in the UK in the 1980s due to their susceptibility to fragmented summative assessments. More recently, driven primarily by delivery needs during the pandemic, many universities implemented strategies to further segment their module assessments. Assessment patterns are especially difficult to coordinate across joint/epistemologically diverse programmes and may become ill-fitting over time when shaped from individual module perspectives. This effectively creates the problem of high assessment load inevitably leading to "pedagogy of control"□ and consequences thereof: (i) fewer opportunities for formative assessment and feedback, (ii) surface learning (consequently ongoing progression challenges), (iii) more mitigating circumstances and resits, and (iv) diminished student engagement. The resulting impact of a relentless regimen of summative assessments on students is therefore potentially profound with far-reaching consequences that affect both students and staff.

This talk is motivated by this urgent need to tackle the problem of high assessment loads as an emerging and widespread trend. The talk highlights the very real risk of prematurely implementing radical changes to assessment models without addressing existing shortcomings in the overall approach to designing, delivering, and evaluating programme assessment strategy. Implementing an assessment model without insights into assessment loads from a student's perspective may perpetuate the typical practice of how assessment loads across programmes are handled. Strategy should also account for disciplinary context especially when considering programme-level assessment models for interdisciplinary and epistemologically diverse programmes. Hence, the importance of considering of the underlying factors and context by incorporating the perspectives (lived experiences) of students and staff when developing sustainable programme assessment strategies is also addressed.

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