

# making the case

## Improving results and student experience through the application of the BLPAS (Blended Learning Phased Assessment Strategy) framework to a cohort of 200 level 5 students.

*Ingrid Kanuga*

*The London School of Hospitality and Tourism, University of West London, UK*

### **Theme(s)**

**Teaching/Professional practice:** Managing e-Assessment

### **The background context**

This is a level 5, 20 credit module, delivered to 200 students within the fields of hospitality, events, aviation and tourism in the London School of Hospitality and Tourism. The module is called “managing people in practice” and at the end of the 14 week taught part of the module the students go on a 1-year work placement.

The students come from a mixed background, reflective of the local demographics in London. Both international and home/EU students study the module. Most learners need to support their studies through part-time work and in some cases full time work. A small percentage is mature with a family to support.

A survey taken by the students in 2010 showed that most students are practical learners and enjoy taking part in active learning activities.

The theory part of this module discusses Human Resource Management in preparation for their placement the following semester. In the past the delivery of this module has been outsourced to another school within the University. We experienced a lower than average submission rate on this part of the module as well a lower median grade. The method of assessment was an essay. It was felt by the module review team that involving PebblePad would allow for a more active learning environment which could be accessed both at the University and at home and which would appeal more to the student described above.

In addition, for the practical part of the module the students complete a work portfolio during their placement, which was previously submitted in hard copy. In 2010, PebblePad was introduced to transfer the assignment to an online submission.

However, students who did not have previous assignments using PebblePad found it difficult and de-motivating to do so. To avoid reoccurrence, we needed to ensure that in 2011 the theory part would include a PebblePad assignment.

### **Why PebblePad?**

Using PebblePad allowed us to phase the assessment with 10 part-submissions on which we could give formative feedback either in person or online. As this was a large cohort it allowed for quick overviews of who had worked on/submitted part of their assignment by simply looking at updated items on the gateway.

### **The purpose**

The aim of this project was to enhance the learning and experience thereof for the mixed cohort of students, and with that increase the submission rate for the theory part of the module as well as to increase the average grade by applying the method of formative feedback through the phased assessment framework. A secondary objective was to make students more accustomed to using the PebblePad software, which would help them with their online work portfolio for the practical part of the module. Thirdly we were keen to develop the Blended Learning Phased Assessment Strategy (BLPAS) framework, with the vision of applying it to other modules and programmes in the future. PebblePad was found to be the ideal platform for this.

## The approach

A project to review the theory part of the module and assessment was initiated in January 2011 with the initial intention to make this a blended learning module where the learners would be able to learn either via classroom teaching or online, depending on their own needs. The re-design of the module was led and implemented by the module leader and was developed and implemented by September 2011.

The stakeholders were the students, the module delivery team, the Field Leader, and the employers for the practical part of the module.

The methodology was based on the BLPAS framework. A phased assessment strategy, where students complete a range of activities or small assignments as part of a larger assignment, like a portfolio, increases student engagement and allows for development of skills (Baker, 2010). The BLPAS framework was initially designed to allow learners to develop their graduate and employability skills through a range of activities forming a phased assessment whilst considering the student profile. The framework took into consideration the rapid development required without risking a cognitive overload, whilst being designed to facilitate reflection, peer and community feedback. Within this framework the student builds up the required skills through completing a range of activities relevant to the employability skills needed in the field, which involve building up theoretical knowledge, experience, action and reflection and on-going feedback from the tutor and peers both online and in person.

The BLPAS framework was successfully piloted on a previous cohort of 50 direct entry, level 6, international students studying a similar module. The students in the pilot study reflected positively on their learning experience and academic results improved notably (Kanuga & Viram, 2011).

To manage the teaching and learning, the webfolio function of PebblePad was used to create a standard template which students could copy and publish from their gateway. We set up gateways per seminar group, which allowed tutors to quickly assess progress per group and to display the gateway in class when needed. Within the webfolio template students had access to 20 pages. Most pages were linked to the weekly theory covered in lectures in an interactive way allowing students to access online video resources and articles on the week's topic, and answer a set of reflective questions. One page linked to a separate webfolio which was created to help students prepare for work if they wished to do so. This webfolio included activities like CV building, practicing interview techniques, and answering questions on employability skills. We also included a "Help" page with frequently asked questions on using the technology.

The most important page for the project was called "my assignment" and in here students had access to a video, a powerpoint presentation, and a PDF document, all outlining details on the phased assessment and how to upload documents within the webfolio. The different methods of explanation were used to ensure the needs of all different learning styles were met. For the phased assessment, students were required to produce a powerpoint slide per weekly topic. This slide needed to be attractive to a diverse audience and the notes section needed to include theory, evaluation, analysis and justification appropriate to the academic level. Tutors would check the assignment on a weekly basis through the gateway and give formative feedback. The final assignment

required the student to upload a video of them presenting the slides as they would do when presenting to a company and to link this video in their webfolio.

Students were being assessed on their phased assignment only but feedback was provided on all elements completed within the webfolio, for example the CV.

## The result

We saw a direct result on student submission and improvement of grades.

- On a cohort of 203 students we achieved a submission rate of 98%.
- In 2010 the median grade was 49; in 2011 this was 58.
- In 2010 25 students achieved between 30-39; in 2011 this decreased to 14 students.
- In 2010 28 students achieved between 60-69; in 2011 this increased to 52 students.
- In 2010 17 students achieved between 70-79; in 2011 this increased to 27 students.
- In 2010 4 students achieved between 80-89; in 2011 this increased to 13 students.

In addition all students were asked to submit a 300-600 word individual reflection on their learning during the 14 week module, with reference to the blended learning phased assessment and/or what they had learned of the HR function/ preparing for work and career opportunities. The students could comment on either, or a combination of, the theory, the phased assessment method, the formative feedback, or the seminar work.

For this study we selected 109 reflective submissions out of the total cohort of 203 students. The reason for selecting these submissions was that they were unidentifiable by either name or student number when opened in a WORD document.

The students were allowed complete flexibility regarding which part they wanted to reflect on and, for the purpose of this study, we identified 6 key areas for analysis:

1. The student reflected on their theoretical (HRM) learning during the module.
2. The student reflected on the phased assessment method in a positive manner.
3. The student reflected on the phased assessment method in a negative manner.
4. The student reflected on using PebblePad in a positive manner.
5. The student reflected on using PebblePad in a negative manner.
6. The student clearly linked what they had learned overall in the module to applying this knowledge in practice as part of their careers.

Some students commented on a combination of the above points. Multiple mentions on one key area, in one reflective note, were counted as one mention.

90% of the students mentioned key area 1. To be counted as a mention, we only looked at reflections that demonstrated the learning taking place; descriptions or reviews of HR theory were not counted. For example, one student commented:

*"Working full time for 5 years, the Human Resources department was a completely unknown world for me. I had never known what*

*its role was. After completing this module it is clear to me that there is a big importance to the HR section in a hotel and that they are a huge part of the strategies that need to be thought of to make a hotel work and to provide the best customer service. I really like HR now”.*

The high amount of mentions in area 1 is evidence that the method of teaching and assessment worked and that the student learned and enjoyed learning.

A total of 62 students commented on the benefits of the phased assessment.

“ *Preparing the weekly assignments and receiving feedback helped me improve my academic writing whilst still being able to be creative. The video presentation was daunting but watching myself back I learned from my mistakes. I will use this method in the future and I hope I can submit drafts for all my subjects* ”

34 students commented on using PebblePad, with one negative comment:

*“I did not enjoy PebblePad, I find it difficult to use however I acknowledge that we need to get used to different IT packages as we will get those at work.”*

Positive comments included:

*“I mostly appreciated PebblePad which was fun and taught me a lot about myself”.*

*“In the beginning I thought it was confusing but now I think it is straight forward and it will look good on my CV”.*

*“I very much liked using PebblePad and I like that I can update my work and share with future employers”.*

Finally, 69% of the students related what they had learned to their work and careers and mentioned how they felt that the module would help them in the future. Many of the students said they really understood all the roles within their companies now and how to get to where they want to get in life.

It could be argued that the evidence taken from the reflective notes is positively biased as the students were submitting it as part of their assignment. However, the flexibility around what they were allowed to comment on reduces this risk. In addition students were allowed to reflect positive as well as negative. In general the notes demonstrated that the student learned from the module and that they enjoyed the learning.

### The impact

- As can be seen from the above evidence the students benefited more from the phased assessment method and also reflected positively on their learning experience.
- Marks improved and the submission rate was 98%.
- As a teaching team of six, we believe that from a “managing e-assessment perspective” it would be

difficult to administer such an assessment without a tool like PebblePad. PebblePad allowed us to track progress of students and to give formative feedback through a range of channels.

- A similar model or framework could be applied to other modules, and these do not have to be of a similar nature or topic area.

### Lessons learnt

- We had underestimated the learning curve in using PebblePad for formative feedback for both the teaching team and the students. The first four weeks of the module required additional teaching for the teaching team and the students on how to use PebblePad.
- The number of phases (in this instance 10) was challenging to manage and in the future we would most likely reduce this.
- As well as a submission tool for an e-assessment, PebblePad was also used to provide online learning modules. This may have caused some confusion amongst the students as to where to upload their assessments. The online learning modules were not utilised by the students and we will need to review the need of this for the future, or how to integrate them into the teaching and learning differently.
- For a large cohort the module resulted in additional administration of the numerous gateways. It is important that all educators involved in the delivery of the module and providing of formative and final feedback understand how to use the gateway and the resources to their advantage.

### In brief – making the case for PebblePad

- PebblePad allows for the submission of multiple assessments throughout a module and provides an easy overview of these submissions to the educator.
- The phased assessment method through PebblePad has proven to be a success in terms of the learning experience for the student and the results achieved.
- PebblePad allows the educator to give formative feedback and for other educators to comment on this if needed.

### References:

Baker, G. (2010). “So when is the final exam, then?” New forms of assessment and student engagement. In: Kemp, P., Atfield, R. and Tong, R. (eds.) *Enhancing learning through assessment in business and management hospitality leisure sport tourism*. Newbury Berks: Threshold Press, pg. IX-XVIII

Kanuga, I. & Visram, Z. (2011). Using a web-based platform to enhance employability skills of the global citizen student: introducing the Blended Learning Phased Assessment Employability Strategy (BLPASES) framework. In T. Bastiaens & M. Ebner (Eds.), *Proceedings of World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications 2011* (pp. 419-423). Chesapeake, VA: AACE.