

Assessing the Impact of the ‘SkillSense for Assessment Mastery (SSAM) Programme©’ on Level 4 Higher Education Students: A Study on Assessment Initiatives

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Abstract

This paper introduces the 'SkillSense for Assessment Mastery (SSAM) Programme©' designed to teach assessment literacy in higher education, outlining its theoretical rationale and research-informed insights for its implementation. The SSAM Programme aims to enhance understanding of the learning process, offer personalized support, and align assessments with academic skills. Prioritizing fairness and diversity, it fosters a sense of belonging in the academic Community of Practice (CoP). The programme includes workshops with presentations, peer, and self-assessment activities based on the purposefully designed Academic Skills Feedback and Marking Rubric (ASR). Emphasis is on the vital importance of cultivating students' self-efficacy and essential skills. The initiative focuses on scaffolding reflective learning, utilizing quantitative and qualitative data for its ongoing evaluation. Empirical insights from this continuous evaluation within a UK Higher Education Institution during 2022-24 will also be presented briefly in this paper to demonstrate its effectiveness in promoting student development.

Keywords: *Assessment, self-efficacy, self-reflective learning, community of practice, academic skills, agency*

1. Introduction: Fostering self-efficacy, sense of belonging and academic identity

Bundara (1977) describes self-efficacy as a belief in oneself that is so strong it can affect or even determine one's own behaviour. It is our self-belief in our ability to do something that allows us to succeed in our performance in said task. It is key to building any type of identity. And as I argue in this current paper, creating a sense of belonging to any domain is key to increasing self-confidence, self-belief, and therefore self-efficacy. Our identity affects our learning (McDowell, Živoder, & Tolomelli, 2016). It is therefore important that students 'see' themselves as core members of their academic community, and in the content they study. This

is because if we associate ourselves with something, we are more likely to see its relevance, to connect with it, to become a better and more in-depth learner (Wenger, 1998). Identity therefore plays a very important role in a student's learning experience. How we see ourselves as doers of learning (in whatever topic or pedagogical field) affects our ability to engage in said field and be successful in the area. Students who can engage at the level where they consider themselves as part of that CoP are more likely to be successful for two main reasons. Firstly, having a sense of belonging can create feelings of self-efficacy; engaging with behaviours that are integral to an identity often leads to success, such as reading, drafting, and completing assessments. But this is driven by understanding what assessments are in the first place. Secondly, they will see themselves as more capable of achieving in their field if they belong, and this belonging comes from understanding, from knowing, and from experience. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy working in a positive (rather than negative) manner (Merton, 1948).

Engaging students in the academic assessment process during the transition stage is pivotal for fostering a sense of belonging. This sense allows students to perceive themselves as university and academic individuals, positively influencing their understanding of assessments and confidence in their abilities which is a crucial aspect of their identity as students. Academic identity significantly predicts student success (McDowell et al., 2016), emphasizing the profound impact of creating a sense of belonging on learning and achievement across academic topics. Developing students' agency in their learning is imperative, involving their integration into the academic CoP (Meyer, 2010; Gonzalez, 2023). Challenging prevailing perceptions of assessment is crucial, transitioning students from viewing it as a process for assurance, as something done 'to' them, to actively embracing it as a tool for knowledge enhancement (Evans & Waring, 2024). To support student achievement, addressing identity issues in the classroom is essential. This involves engaging students in the academic assessment design process, learning outcomes, marking and feedback rubrics, and academic skills. Integrating students into these processes through teaching and explanation helps demystify the assessment process, boosting confidence, self-efficacy, and self-regulated learning, ultimately enhancing achievement. Recognizing the critical role of student agency in assessment and feedback processes is essential for both academics and students. Therefore, I created the *SkillSense for Assessment Mastery (SSAM) Programme* (henceforth SkillSense) to facilitate these objectives for students.

While modest in scale, the SkillSense Programme presented in this current paper contributes to the scholarly discourse on the impact of teaching transitioning into academic learners, a sense of belonging to their new community, highlighting the necessity for further expansive research on the utilization of scaffolding to foster self-reflective learning, learner agency, and self-efficacy within the assessment domain. SkillSense is theoretically grounded in the work of Wenger (1998) and Eckert and Mc-Connell-Ginet (1999) on CoP, and how communities are built on linguistic behaviours, practices, and competencies (King, 2014), as well as the work of

Molloy, Boud and Henderson (2020) on feedback nature in Higher Education, accentuating learner agency and feedback literacy. It extends upon Bandura's (1997) work on self-efficacy development in reflective learning. The research also recognizes the integral role of feedback in reflective learning, emphasizing the dual role of students as receivers and providers of feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 2013; Boud, Cohen, Sampson, 2001). Scaffolding, based on Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1984), forms the foundation for employing SkillSense aligning with contemporary practices in Higher Education employing scaffolding (Coulson & Harvey, 2013). Given the exponential growth and diversification of the student body, including international students, scaffolding students in the assessment process emerges as crucial processes in ensuring quality assurance in higher education, impacting student efficacy, their learning identity and sense of belonging, and student attainment and improvement. This current paper also affirms the positive impact of SkillSense on; student confidence and understanding of academic assessment; fostering reflective learning, feedback literacy, and learner agency; and self-efficacy among new learners transitioning into a Higher Education context.

SkillSense was created to address the impact of students' self-efficacy on learning outcomes, recognizing the importance of understanding students' divergent starting points upon entry to higher education. It works with the students during the planning stages of assessment to align their perceptions, understanding, attainment and demonstration of academic skills with the task requirements (and learning outcomes) of each assessment. In doing so, it helps students become successful self-regulators. Self-regulators are described as discerning individuals who actively contribute to the assessment process, read task requirements effectively, set appropriate goals, plan carefully, choose and adapt strategies, seek deep understanding, and use feedback judiciously (Evans & Waring, 2024). SkillSense focuses on the students' understanding of the language of assessment, promoting assessment literacy, and making assessment requirements explicit. It teaches students the skills to navigate assessments effectively, allowing them the learning opportunities to apply and adapt their knowledge and skills. Students who learn passively in a classroom rather than grappling with the processes are not given the opportunity to learn the 'why', but rather focus only on the 'how'. It also focuses on connecting assessments with academic skills, a module's learning outcomes, assessment marking criteria, and marking processes, as opposed to having assessment as a disconnected step. But it does not simply provide them with all the aforementioned information. It teaches students the 'why'. Procedural understanding is especially important to creating belonging but is often neglected by lecturers. Yet students must be fully engaged with their material to have in-depth learning (Wenger, 1998).

SkillSense teaches students in various assessment processes within their degree program, emphasizing key academic skills as vehicles for displaying learning in assessments. The focus is on teaching the vocabulary of assessment and elucidating what academic skills entail and how they manifest in academic writing. This approach strengthens students' understanding of their

skill base, emphasizing a dynamic process of improvement rather than adherence to fixed grading rubrics. The deliberate use of the term 'skills' implies a developmental connotation, emphasizing that students have the capacity to enhance their abilities throughout their degree. SkillSense not only teaches skill development but also promotes the idea that progressive struggle is beneficial. Skills are viewed not as inherent traits but as capabilities that students can develop over the course of their degree. Recognizing the diversity in students' preparedness upon entering university (Office for Students, 2024), and that groups of students excel in certain skills when they transition into H.E, where others do not (McDowell et al, 2016), SkillSense avoids benchmarking against historically dominant groups, which may not be conducive to the development of at-risk students (Gonzalez, 2023). Instead, the focus is on understanding individual strengths without relying on dominant groups as the unmarked standard. This shift allows for a reframing of what is considered 'good' and 'standard', enabling the identification of opportunity gaps rather than achievement gaps. SkillSense contributes to building every student's academic identity through an inclusive approach that fosters self-efficacy. Poor assessment practices disproportionately affect disadvantaged learners. Thus, employing data effectively to investigate the impact of assessment design on diverse groups is crucial (Waring & Evans, 2024). The SkillSense Rubric (ASR) facilitates data-driven assessment by enabling lecturers to evaluate student skill development and assess the fairness, clarity, and appropriateness of their assessments. This marking rubric provides valuable student outcome data, allowing lecturers to identify performance variations among student groups and understand the underlying reasons. So, the ASR serves as a diagnostic tool for pedagogical approaches and assessment designs, enabling lecturers to address fairness issues, scrutinize assessment robustness, and evaluate the relevance of measures employed in testing student learning.

2. The SkillSense Programme: Embracing a 'Community of Practice Approach'.

The rest of this current paper provides a brief overview of the SkillSense Programme, followed by a subsection of the evaluative data that measures its effectiveness. The Programme consists of 3 x 2hour workshops that encompass group discussions, peer and self-assessment activities, and assessment preparation, all grounded in the ASR to teach and applying assessment literacy skills in an academic context. Self and peer assessment and such scaffolded learning contributes to an effective learning cycle, reinforcing confidence-building and efficient learning (Bandura, 1997; Kolb, 1984). This approach simultaneously creates a joint enterprise within the CoP, where students collaboratively work toward shared goals (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1998). To achieve this joint enterprise, students learn a repertoire of resources, including the language of assessment and specialized terminology (Holmes, 2006). In workshop one, students learn about the academic assessment processes in their Higher Education Institution. Then, using the ASR, they engage in group discussions on the language of academic skills, and learn how to interpret the language of assessment questions to effectively address specified learning

outcomes. This collaborative approach not only fosters mutual engagement but also serves as a crucial element in the formation of their CoP (King, 2014). Consequently, the identity of ‘being a student’ must be adopted for group members to effectively communicate with one another. This then increases belonging to their CoP as well as their student learner identity (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1998). In workshop two, students collaboratively engage in the peer assessment of relevant assessment examples, creating a shared learning experience. This experience, akin to the role of a ‘marker’ provides firsthand marking experience using the tools that will be applied to assess their own assessments. This comparative approach (comparing ‘good’ and ‘weak’ assessments) teaches students to understand quality, facilitates internal feedback mechanisms, enhances visualization and exploration skills, all fostering self-regulated learning. Through peer assessment and feedback using the ASR, students develop mastery in academic assessment marking and feedback procedures to address potential discomfort with uncertainty about improvement (Evans & Waring, 2024). During workshop three, students are taught how to utilize the ASR to craft an assessment draft that emphasizes the learning outcomes they are required to exhibit and the academic skills necessary for successful completion. By embedding skills this way (within the context of the assessment rather than presenting them in isolation), SkillSense promotes deeper student engagement, aligning with the principles outlined by Wenger (1998) and the findings of Evans and Waring (2024). The Programme’s integration into existing content modules ensures sustained relevance, with continuous references throughout the teaching course. The flexibility inherent in this approach allows lecturers to tailor activities and workshop presentations to align seamlessly with specific assessments, module learning outcomes, and marking criteria, providing a nuanced and contextually relevant educational experience. This integrated model underscores the significance of acquiring skills that are then universally applicable across the entirety of the degree program.

2.1. Using feedback effectively to develop learner agency and feedback literacy.

As well as being taught the linguistic repertoire and processes of academic assessment in depth via peer assessment and scaffolded activities, the SkillSense workshops also teaches students how to use assessment feedback effectively to develop self-reflection skills and learner agency. The potential role of self-assessment in this context signals a tentative shift toward democratizing power and motivating learners to take responsibility for their learning process. Therefore, teaching students how to use feedback effectively to develop their self-reflection skills and develop their agency in their own learning process, is crucial. Feedback literacy is an essential element students must embrace to become a member of their academic CoP. This involves being able to effectively use feedback for not just individual assessments, but for their entire academic journeys (Evans & Waring, 2024). To advance assessment and feedback practices, students must be trained to identify, seek, generate, and enact feedback, converting it into ‘feedforward’ (p24). But most importantly, students must learn to take greater responsibility in the feedback process. Students who recognise the value of feedback to guide their learning

have enhanced self-efficacy and are more capable of self-regulated learning. In short, students must internalise the potential of feedback, what it means, and how to engage with it effectively, which in turn can come from their understanding of assessment processes and requirements. SkillSense aims then to enhance students' reflective capacity on their learning quality through repeated self-assessment opportunities utilizing existing materials like marking criteria during the workshops. Workshops emphasize the importance of reflective practices, integrating them into the learning process to contribute to students' academic identity. They educate students on how assessment structure impacts module learning outcomes. SkillSense employs the ASR listing 12 key academic skills during marking. This allows markers to highlight positive and negative skill demonstrations in students' writing, enabling self-assessment. Students can learn from both successful and challenging examples, gaining insights into skill mastery and areas for improvement. Therefore, SkillSense also fosters collaboration between students and academics in the feedback process. By teaching students about the skills in the workshops, and providing feedback that integrates these skills, students can understand their success and failure in terms they understand and develop strategies to address any setbacks. This contextualized guidance means staff work *with* students to support their development of positive self-regulatory strategies. This feedback can empower students to strategically focus their efforts for improvement. It not only informs their decisions but also provides them with actionable strategies. Students can *actively participate* in shaping their feedback experience by requesting emphasis on specific skills they find challenging from their lecturer, fostering increased engagement and control over their own assessment feedback process.

3. Evaluating the SkillSense Programme

The Programme unfolded over three consecutive weeks in the first semester of Level 4 (running from September to January). The structure comprised three two-hour workshops, complemented by take-home activities for participants to complete between sessions. Programme evaluation to date has involved participants enrolled in four Level 4 modules (85 students) within the Humanities Programme and one Level 4 module (21 students) within the

Education Programme at a U.K university during the academic years 2022-2023, totaling 106 students. The evaluation process involved a pre-initiative survey of 15 questions to assess student background knowledge and understanding of academic assessment processes, and confidence in such; and a post-initiative survey and focus groups. The post-initiative survey included 20 questions exploring the impact of SkillSense on student confidence, self-efficacy, and understanding, with specific inquiries about the ASR and Peer Assessment activities (see Table 1 'themes' based on survey question topics). Qualitative data was collected via focus groups with self-selected participants from each cohort who also completed the survey, where they discussed topics related to the initiative during 30-minute sessions. This paper does not aim to provide an exhaustive statistical analysis of survey outcomes but instead offers a concise

overview of select quantitative patterns and qualitative subtleties from a subsection of the evaluative data. The data focuses on one module within the Humanities programme, involving two rounds of student cohorts (Sept 2022 - Dec 2023, 10 students; Sept 2023 - Dec 2024, 19 students). Survey responses were collected from 29 students, results of which are combined for this paper. 8 students took part in post-intervention focus groups.

4. Results

The findings involve the 29 students discussed in section 3, with themes coded from survey questions. This paper focuses on subthemes marked 'X' in Table 1, efficiently combining both quantitative and qualitative results for each subtheme.

Table 1: Themes of ‘The impact of the overall SkillSense Programme’

Theme: The Impact of the overall SkillSense Programme on:	
A. Specific understanding of marking criteria	
B. Specific understanding and developing of academic skills, and how to demonstrate them in assessments	X
C. Specific understanding and interpreting of essay questions	
D. Confidence in understanding and interpreting essay questions	X
E. Specific understanding of the learning outcomes and how to demonstrate they have been met via using academic skills	X
F. Confidence in using marking criteria in answering an essay question	X
G. Confidence in using the assessment description in answering a question	
H. Overall understanding of assessments in general	
I. Confidence in using feedback effectively as a self-reflective learner	X
J. Improved engagement with assessments and learning (within their CoP)	X
K. Increased identity as an academic student/student learner	X
L. Developed understanding of the academic process of assessment	X
M. Using Feedback Effectively	X

The findings within each theme below highlight the positive influence of the initiative across various dimensions, including specific understanding of grading criteria and essay questions, enhanced confidence in using assessment criteria, an ability to now use feedback effectively, and the overall impact of learning about how to apply the ASR.

4.1. Specific understanding, development and demonstration of academic skills; Specific understanding of learning outcomes and how to meet them by using academic skills

After completing all SkillSense workshops, participants were requested to evaluate their comprehension and application of academic skills gained through the Programme to measure its effectiveness. Participants were asked to rate their understanding of demonstrating academic skills when writing assessments. The results indicate that 21 participants now fully understood, 7 mostly understood, and 1 was still developing an understanding. The ASR assisted students

in comprehending academic skills and, crucially, in demonstrating their acquisition in their own writing. These skills were transferable, with all students finding they could incorporate the skills into a range of different assessments across various modules:

“You can see how to demonstrate the skills and incorporate them into all your different lessons.”

Participants were asked to assess their understanding of applying academic skills to meet marking criteria and learning outcomes. The responses reveal that 21 participants now fully understood, 6 mostly understood, and 2 were still developing an understanding of this aspect. One student for example reported that the ASR helped them to further understand the marking criteria and how to address each one in their work by demonstrating the relevant academic skill:

“It really helps me to understand what you needed to hit all of these criteria, and it's easier to break down what they want and what parts of the skills taxonomy they expect you to include to demonstrate each criterion and demonstrate the academic skills necessary to get that percentage mark.”

The survey sought to measure participants' confidence in applying the academic skills knowledge newly acquired during the Programme to their assessments. The responses indicate that 15 participants were now very confident, 11 were fairly confident, and 2 were still developing confidence in applying these skills.

Participants were asked to reflect on the effectiveness of the self and peer assessment activities, which included peer marking of 'student paragraphs,' using the lecturer's feedback and the ASR in developing their understanding of these skills in assessments. The results demonstrate that 14 participants strongly agreed, and 15 agreed that these elements contributed significantly to their skill development. These practices in the workshops increased their evaluative judgement, teaching them how to recognise quality in others, and therefore their own, work.

4.2. Confidence in understanding and interpreting essay questions; confidence in using marking criteria in answering essay questions

This section aims to evaluate the influence of SkillSense on participants' grasp of utilizing marking criteria in assessment writing and to measure their proficiency in interpreting essay questions, identifying areas of improvement. Participants rated their confidence when using marking criteria after the Programme. The results indicate that 16 participants now felt much more confident, 8 were fairly confident, and 5 were still developing confidence. This increase in confidence levels among participants indicates a positive shift in their understanding of using marking criteria after attending the workshops. The workshops appear to have addressed concerns and uncertainties, with no participants expressing a lack of confidence post Programme. The absence of students reporting no confidence suggests that SkillSense effectively instilled a sense of assurance and competence in participants regarding the use of marking criteria in assessment writing. This outcome underscores the success of the workshops

in enhancing participants' knowledge and skills in this specific aspect of academic writing. All focus group participants agreed that the initiative had developed their understanding of how to interpret essay questions. They were now able to examine the instructional verbs in a range of essay questions to decipher what the assessment outcomes should be. This then aided them when creating a draft of their essay in line with the marking criteria and academic skills crib sheet. Students felt overall that they had a better understanding of what their lecturers were asking them to report on, and how, in their assessments:

“I know better what they are looking for, like the answers that they're looking for in the words of the essay question...for example, the difference between instructions like ‘discuss’ or ‘explain’ and what that means.”

4.3. Developed understanding of academic process of assessment; improved engagement with assessments and learning; increased identity as academic student/student learner

To assess students' comprehension of the academic assessment process, the evaluation aimed to measure the impact of SkillSense on students' understanding of learning outcomes and the application of marking criteria (e.g., their purpose, usage, and significance) in assessment writing. It also explored the Programme's influence on students' perception of assessment at the university level and their motivation to engage in the learning and assessment processes. An improvement is observed in students' understanding of learning outcomes post Programme. A remarkable 92% of participants reported a better understanding, indicating the Programme's effectiveness in clarifying the expectations tied to assessments. Students reported that the initiative assisted them in navigating the academic process of assessment writing by enhancing their understanding of academic skills and their application in their work. Additionally, they found value in utilizing marking criteria to strategically plan assessment content:

“I understand the things I'm supposed to talk about in an in an essay question way more than I did before, because at the beginning, I would just see the essay question, and only talk about that. But this has helped me understand the skills I must show to competently answer that question.”

All participants (100%) reported a newly developed understanding of how to use marking criteria when writing assessments. This outcome underscores the success of the Programme in equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate and apply marking criteria effectively. When asked about their current understanding levels of using marking criteria when writing assessments, 14 students reported now having a full understanding, 9 mostly understood, and 4 were still developing their understanding. This distribution indicates an overall positive trend in students' ongoing comprehension of marking criteria post workshops:

“It helped me understand new concepts of how we will tackle exam questions of how we analyse, and we unpack the question for, for the student to comprehend and to write the exact points needed.”

The Programme also had a positive impact on students' perception of assessment at university level. A majority of 22 students strongly agreed, 5 agreed, and 2 remained neutral about the workshops teaching them more about assessment and its intricacies at the university level. This indicates an enhanced awareness and comprehension of the assessment process among participants. Furthermore, 92% of participants (28) agreed that taking the Programme motivated them to engage more in their learning and the assessment process because they now felt part of the community. This positive response suggests that the workshops not only imparted knowledge but also inspired an initiative-taking approach to learning and assessment among participants by creating a sense of belonging to their academic subject.

4.4. Using Feedback Effectively: Assessment Results

To evaluate the effectiveness of students utilizing feedback provided through the ASR, which includes annotated comments highlighting strengths and weaknesses, the evaluation involved analysing assessment results from both cohorts. Results from the 2022-2023 cohort (10 students, 9 of which submitted coursework) showed a significant improvement in average marks, rising from 56.88% in the draft assessment to 66.63%, with 1 student advancing by two grade boundaries (62% to 85%). Even those who initially received over 70% (marks exceeding 70% are classified as a First in the UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) degree classification system) saw improvement, such as 1 student moving from 72% to 85% by using their assessment feedback effectively. The module's failure rate decreased from 36% in 2022 to 6% in 2023. In the 2023-2024 cohort (19 students, 16 of which submitted coursework), the average mark increased from 54.81% in the draft assessment to 64.35%, with 6 students improving by two full grade boundaries. Similarly, 2 students who initially received 72% improved to 85% through effective feedback utilization. Notably, the failure rate dropped from 6% in 2023 to 0% in 2024. In contrast to a non-intervention cohort (2021-2022) that, on average, only maintained or marginally improved grades while remaining within the same grade boundary (for example, only increasing from 52% to 55%), indicates added value from the SkillSense training. Students found the peer and self-assessment activities using the ASR valuable for understanding assessment grading and gained confidence in providing their own feedback. Assessing both strong and weak student work allowed them to align assessment learning outcomes with the marking criteria. Group discussions on assigned marks further enhanced understanding and confidence in meeting marking criteria in their own work:

“Individually, we marked another student's assessment, and then we compared it to what each other had said, it was good because everyone had come up with the same points. It was good that [the lecturer] showed us an example that was really good, and then one that was at a lower

level. When you're marking somebody's work, you can point out their mistakes. You can compare the mark you've given with lecturers marking. That's really valuable for when it comes to using lecturer's feedback in my own work."

5. Conclusion

In summary, despite its limited scope on a specific subject area and educational level, survey results overwhelmingly indicate that participants perceive SkillSense as beneficial. The positive influence on understanding and academic skills consistently emerges in both survey responses and qualitative insights from focus group discussions. The evaluation underscores participants' confidence in understanding and applying academic skills acquired through the SkillSense Workshops, particularly focusing on the ASR. The Programme positively influenced participants' ability to demonstrate marking criteria and learning outcomes in assessments, with peer review, lecturer feedback, and the framework playing pivotal roles in reinforcing comprehension. Overall, it instilled confidence in participants to effectively apply acquired academic skills. The notable increase in confidence levels indicates a positive impact on their ability to apply marking criteria effectively when writing assessments to demonstrate the required learning outcomes. This positive impact extends to students' perceptions of university-level assessment and their motivation to actively engage in learning and assessment processes. Lastly, it has been effective in teaching students how to engage effectively with their feedback, resulting in an overall increase in marks within and between both cohorts.

6. Limitations

Caution is advised in generalizing findings beyond the specific university context and limited sample size. Unique institutional factors may restrict the study's external validity. The data collection period, from September 2022 to January 2024, does not capture the initiative's long-term effects. The paper primarily discusses the Level 4 Humanities cohort, posing challenges to generalizability. Evaluation work in other disciplines is ongoing but not included in this paper. Efforts are in progress to enhance generalizability by examining the initiative's impact across diverse demographics and academic levels.

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