

Supporting Student Transition and Belonging Through Assessment Literacy Development

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Abstract

Transitioning into higher education often involves uncertainty around academic expectations, particularly regarding assessment. Such uncertainty can undermine students' emerging sense of belonging—a construct closely associated with engagement, motivation, and persistence. This paper examines how a structured intervention, the SkillSense Programme, supports first-year students of various pedagogical backgrounds by demystifying assessment practices and promoting academic confidence. A mixed-methods design was employed to strengthen methodological transparency and provide both quantitative and qualitative insight into students' transition experiences. Pre-survey (n = 83) and post-survey (n = 45) data, focus-group were analysed to evaluate how explicit assessment support shapes students' feelings of capability and connectedness. Findings indicate substantial improvements in students' understanding of assessment criteria, academic writing expectations, and sense of belonging. The study positions assessment clarity as a key component of transition pedagogy, showing that early, explicit guidance can reduce anxiety and strengthen students' academic identities.

Keywords: *student belonging; transition pedagogy; assessment literacy; academic confidence; first-year experience; SkillSense Programme.*

1. Introduction

The transition into higher education is widely acknowledged as a period during which students' sense of belonging is formed (Thomas, 2012). Belonging—defined as feeling recognised and legitimate within an academic community—is positively associated with persistence, engagement, and achievement (Freiberger et al., 2012; Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Yet many students enter university without a clear understanding of academic expectations, particularly around assessment, which can heighten anxiety (Folwell & Brennan, 2025) and disrupt their developing academic identity (McDowell et al., 2016).

This current study is theoretically grounded in transition pedagogy, social constructivism, and self-efficacy theory, drawing specifically on Vygotsky's (1978) concept of scaffolded learning, Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy framework, and Wenger's (1998) communities of practice model. These foundational perspectives strengthen the conceptual link between assessment literacy, belonging, and student transition. Assessment carries significant symbolic weight for first-year students. It is often their first substantive point of contact with academic norms, values, and expectations. When these norms are opaque, students may interpret early struggles as personal inadequacy rather than a need for explicit instruction (Gonzalez, 2023). Conversely, transparent assessment practices can cultivate confidence, self-efficacy, and stronger engagement with learning. In the current higher education context, these challenges are increasingly shaped by the emergence of generative artificial intelligence tools, raising questions about assessment security, authentic learning, and how students engage with both secure and less secure assessment formats.

This paper examines the SkillSense Programme as a transition-pedagogy intervention designed to build assessment literacy (Boud & Soler, 2016; Carless & Boud, 2018), foster belonging, and reduce early assessment anxiety. In the contemporary higher education context, the need to explicitly teach students about assessment practices and disciplinary conventions in order to induct them into the academic community of practice as early as possible has never been more important. By developing confidence through knowledge, clarity, and supported engagement with assessment tools, students are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and stronger self-efficacy beliefs that they can achieve—and achieve well—within higher education. Research further suggests that lower self-efficacy, poor academic integrity awareness, and unclear expectations are associated with increased risks of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, contract cheating, and the unethical use of AI tools (Yavich et al., 2024). As such, early assessment-literacy interventions may play an important preventative role in reducing the perceived need to rely on AI-generated work, essay mills, or other forms of academic misconduct by fostering confidence, capability, and authentic engagement with learning.

2. Assessment, Belonging, and Transition Belonging

Belonging is not merely social; it also reflects whether students view themselves as legitimate participants within their discipline (Strayhorn, 2018). Assessment acts as an early gateway into this academic community. However, unclear terminology, unfamiliar criteria, and tacit expectations can create barriers for new learners, especially those from diverse educational backgrounds (Office for Students, 2024). Prior research indicates that unfamiliarity with academic conventions is a major contributor to early disengagement which can lead to student drop out (Yorke, 1999; Almulla, 2023). And in line with existing literature, the SkillSense pre-survey dataset, most students reported difficulty analysing assessment briefs, interpreting criteria, and applying academic writing conventions—barriers shown in previous studies to

reduce self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation (Spinath & Steinmayr, 2012; Zimmerman, 2000). Transition pedagogy highlights the importance of early, explicit instruction that supports students' navigation of academic expectations (McDowell, 2025a; Evans & Waring, 2024). SkillSense reflects this approach by offering structured opportunities to interpret assessment tasks, discuss expectations, and engage with peers in a supportive environment consistent with community-of-practice models (King, 2014).

SkillSense is informed by three interrelated theoretical perspectives. First, social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997) supports the focus on student confidence and academic self-efficacy. Second, Vygotsky's (1978) scaffolding model informs the structured design of the SkillSense intervention, enabling students to move from guided support to independent interpretation of assessment tasks. Third, Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework positions belonging as emerging through participation in shared academic practices and peer dialogue.

3. The SkillSense Programme for Assessment Mastery

The Skillsense Programme is a structured workshop series that provides first-year students with guided support in understanding assessment language, criteria, and academic skills. It draws on scaffolding principles (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1984) and incorporates feedback-literacy development (Molloy et al., 2020; Yan & Carless, 2022).

3.1. Programme structure

Over approximately six hours, students engage in:

- collaborative deconstruction of assessment briefs
- explicit analysis of marking criteria
- guided application of academic skills
- peer and self-assessment using the purposefully designed Assessment Skills Rubric (ASR)
- discussion of feedback processes.

These activities are designed to build confidence, promote awareness, and support self-regulated learning (Boud et al., 2013; Patton, 2015). Module-specific examples ensure relevance and help students recognise assessment literacy as integral—not additional—to disciplinary study (McDowell, 2025b).

4. Methods

A mixed-methods design was employed to provide both measurable changes in confidence, and richer qualitative insights into belonging and transition experiences. The study involved 125

students from four pedagogical fields in various UK HEIs (Early Years, Music, Business School, Linguistics) who took the SkillSense Programme in 2024-2025. Of these:

- 83 completed the pre-survey
- 45 completed the post-survey
- 16 participated in focus groups

4.1. Data collection procedure

The pre-survey was administered during weeks 1–2 of the semester, prior to the SkillSense workshops taking place. The post-survey was administered directly at the end of the SkillSense workshop following completion of the full intervention. Ethical approval was granted under protocol aSHE/SF/UH/05730(1). All participants consented. It is noted at this point that participation in both the intervention and research activities is very unlikely to represent self-selection bias and ALL students taken the participating modules had to attend the SkillSense Programme sessions. Attendance was not voluntary, but rather built into the content of their module lessons.

4.2. Survey instrument

The survey comprised Likert-scale and open-ended items focused on student concerns and confidence in interpreting assessment briefs, understanding marking criteria, academic writing, and belonging. Survey items were informed by literature relating to self-efficacy and assessment literacy, although the instrument was developed for programme evaluation and was not previously validated.

4.3. Qualitative analysis

Focus-group data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. A combined inductive and deductive coding approach was adopted. Deductive codes were informed by the theoretical framework of belonging and self-efficacy, while inductive coding allowed unanticipated themes to emerge directly from participants' accounts of their transition experiences.

5. Findings

5.1. Pre-programme assessment anxiety

Consistent with earlier research (Porter et al., 2004; Shafiee Rad & Alipour, 2024), most students expressed concern about interpreting assessment language, understanding criteria, and

demonstrating learning outcomes. Many felt overwhelmed or unsure how to begin assignments, echoing findings that unclear expectations hinder early academic engagement (Carless & Boud, 2018). They reported having no understanding of how to understand academic language, assessment briefs, nor use any of material provided by their lecturer on learning outcomes, marking criteria and rubrics. Strikingly, in nearly every session, almost all students reported not having read the module learning outcomes, even though the semester was already a few weeks in progress.

5.2. Post-programme improvements in confidence and understanding

Post-survey data revealed good gains:

- 98% reported improved understanding of academic writing and key terminology
- 98% felt more confident interpreting criteria and learning outcomes
- 91% reported increased assessment confidence
- 100% felt an increased sense of belonging to academia

Students indicated that explicit discussions of marking practices helped them feel “in control,” aligning with Bandura’s (1997) assertion that self-efficacy increases task persistence and resilience. Focus-group participants emphasised that realising peers shared similar concerns helped reduce feelings of isolation—a phenomenon also identified by Tinto (1997). Collaborative brief analysis and peer-assessment activities supported the development of an academic identity (Holmes, 2006) and strengthened students’ sense of belonging. Understanding the rationale behind assessment criteria helped students view academic skills as learnable rather than innate—a perspective essential to cultivating growth-oriented academic identities (Merton, 1948; Freiburger et al., 2012). All programme areas reported improved average grades, increased first time submissions (so more students submitted on the 1st sitting) and reduced failure rates following implementation. While such gains may involve multiple factors, the result aligns with research showing that assessment literacy correlates with improved academic outcomes (Miao et al., 2025). An important emerging theme relates to assessment support within AI-enabled learning environments. This is particularly relevant when considering the distinction between secure assessments (e.g., in-person presentations, invigilated tasks) and less secure assessments that may be more vulnerable to over-reliance on AI tools. The findings suggest that explicit assessment-literacy support remains essential in helping students critically engage with task requirements and demonstrate authentic understanding.

6. Discussion

Findings demonstrate that assessment clarity is a powerful mechanism for fostering belonging during transition. Transparent expectations reduce anxiety, support feedback literacy (Carless

& Boud, 2018), and help students perceive themselves as legitimate members of their academic community (Wenger, 1998). SkillSense's collaborative structure also aligns with theories of peer learning (Boud et al., 2001) and supports the shift from passive recipient to active participant—integral to identity formation and engagement (Coulson & Harvey, 2013).

7. Conclusion and Implications

The SkillSense Programme illustrates how assessment literacy can serve as a belonging building tool during the transition to higher education. Providing explicit, early assessment support reduces assessment anxiety; strengthens academic identity; promotes confidence and agency; enhances assessment engagement and persistence. Universities seeking to support transition should integrate structured assessment-literacy interventions, provide discipline-specific examples, and foster peer dialogue on assessment. This study demonstrates that transparent assessment practices can contribute meaningfully to early belonging and academic success.

However, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. The absence of a control group limits claims. Nevertheless, convergence between survey findings and focus-group themes strengthens confidence in the interpretation that SkillSense contributes positively to transition experiences. Furthermore, compared with previous cohorts that had not participated in the SkillSense Programme, all cohorts involved in the intervention showed higher achievement rates, lower failure rates, and, in some modules, a reduced awarding gap. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs and comparative cohorts to strengthen the evidence base.

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