

‘The “SkillSense for Assessment Mastery” Programme’: Developing Engaged Learners through a Community of Practice Approach

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Abstract

This paper introduces and evaluates the 'SkillSense for Assessment Mastery' (SSAM) Programme, a pedagogical initiative designed to improve assessment literacy among first-year undergraduate students in UK higher education. Grounded in theories of Communities of Practice and self-efficacy, SkillSense seeks to build students' confidence, reflective learning, and academic identity by embedding assessment skills within their academic journey. The programme comprises interactive workshops that guide students through peer review, self-assessment, and effective use of feedback via a purpose-built Assessment Skills Rubric (ASR). Evaluation involved mixed methods, including pre- and post-intervention surveys and focus groups conducted over two academic years (2022–2024), with 106 students participating across four modules. Results indicate improvements in students' understanding of assessment criteria, increased engagement with feedback, and enhanced confidence in academic tasks. The paper argues that such structured, skills-based assessment programmes can play a critical role in facilitating student belonging and academic success, particularly during transitions into higher education.

Introduction

Student success in higher education is closely tied to their sense of identity, belonging, and self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific tasks—is a key driver of motivation and academic performance. When students feel integrated into their academic environment, their confidence and capacity for reflective learning tend to increase. This connection is especially important during the transition to university, where students must navigate unfamiliar assessment systems and expectations.

Identity plays a foundational role in learning. As McDowell, Živoder, and Tolomelli (2016) argue, a student's ability to see themselves as part of their academic discipline influences both engagement and achievement. When learners perceive themselves as active members of a scholarly community—what Wenger (1998) defines as a Community of Practice (CoP)—they are more likely to participate, persist, and thrive. Belonging to a CoP nurtures the

development of both cognitive and emotional competencies, encouraging the behaviours, values, and skills necessary for academic success (Durlak et al., 2011; Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

However, many students arrive at university without a clear understanding of the assessment landscape. They often view assessments as isolated hurdles rather than opportunities for growth. Helping students to demystify assessments and engage with them as integral components of learning is therefore essential. Central to this is the development of assessment literacy—the ability to understand, interpret, and apply assessment criteria, feedback, and learning outcomes. Assessment literacy enhances student agency, enabling learners to take ownership of their academic development (Evans & Waring, 2024).

This paper introduces the ‘SkillSense for Assessment Mastery’ (SkillSense) Programme, a structured initiative designed to foster assessment literacy and embed students more deeply in their academic CoP. Grounded in the theories of self-efficacy, scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1984), and feedback literacy (Molloy, Boud, & Henderson, 2020), SkillSense helps students build the skills and reflective practices required to succeed in assessment tasks. Through interactive workshops and guided peer/self-evaluation using the Academic Skills Rubric (ASR), students are supported in becoming more confident, self-aware, and engaged learners. SkillSense does not aim to replicate a CoP structure but rather to support students’ integration into their existing academic communities. By equipping them with the tools to decode and navigate assessments, the programme contributes to their academic identity formation and promotes a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

The SkillSense Programme contributes to the scholarly conversation on the transition of students into academic learners, fostering a sense of belonging, and underscoring the need for further research on scaffolding to support reflective learning, learner agency, and self-efficacy in assessment contexts. SkillSense is rooted in the works of Wenger (1998) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1999) on Communities of Practice (CoP), which are built through linguistic behaviours, practices, and competencies (King 2014), as well as the work of Molloy, Boud, and Henderson (2020) on feedback in higher education, highlighting learner agency and feedback literacy. It builds on Bandura’s (1997) concepts of self-efficacy in reflective learning. The research also acknowledges the role of feedback in learning, particularly in the dual role of students as both recipients and providers of feedback (Boud, Cohen, and Sampson 2001, Boud and Molloy 2013, Boud, Keogh, and Walker 2013). Scaffolding, as conceptualised by Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1984), forms the theoretical framework for SkillSense, aligning with contemporary educational practices that utilise scaffolding (Coulson and Harvey 2013). As student populations continue to grow and diversify, including the increasing number of international students, scaffolding students through the assessment process becomes critical to ensuring quality education and promoting a sense of belonging, academic identity, and attainment.

The SkillSense Programme was created to address the impact of self-efficacy on student learning outcomes, recognising the importance of understanding the diverse starting points of students entering higher education. SkillSense engages students during the planning phase of assessments to align their perceptions, understanding, and demonstration of academic skills with the assessment’s learning outcomes. This approach helps students become

proficient self-regulators. Self-regulated learners are proactive individuals who engage with the assessment process, comprehend task requirements, set appropriate goals, plan effectively, adapt strategies, seek deep understanding, and utilise feedback meaningfully (Evans and Waring 2024). SkillSense focuses on building students' understanding of assessment language, promoting assessment literacy, and making assessment requirements transparent. It teaches students the skills necessary to navigate assessments successfully, offering them opportunities to apply and adapt their knowledge and skills. Students who learn passively, without engaging with the assessment process, miss the opportunity to understand the “why” behind their learning, focusing only on the “how.” The programme also connects assessments to academic skills, learning outcomes, and marking criteria, positioning assessments as an integral part of the learning process, rather than an isolated step, and teaches the “why” behind these processes. This procedural understanding is crucial to creating a sense of belonging, yet it is often overlooked by instructors. To achieve meaningful learning, students must be deeply engaged with their material (Wenger 1998).

SkillSense teaches students various assessment processes, emphasising key academic skills as vehicles for demonstrating learning in assessments. It focuses on teaching the vocabulary of assessment and clarifying how academic skills manifest in academic writing. This approach strengthens students' understanding of their skill set, emphasising that skills are dynamic and improve over time, rather than being fixed attributes. The term 'skills' is used intentionally to convey the developmental nature of these abilities, highlighting that students can continually improve throughout their academic journey. The programme acknowledges the diverse preparedness of students upon entering higher education (Office for Students 2024) and recognises that some groups may excel in certain skills while others may not (McDowell et al. 2016). SkillSense avoids benchmarking against historically dominant groups, which can disadvantage at-risk students (Gonzalez 2023). Instead, it focuses on understanding individual strengths and reframing traditional notions of “good” and “standard” to identify opportunity gaps rather than achievement gaps. By taking an inclusive approach, SkillSense helps to build every student's academic identity, enhancing self-efficacy. Ineffective assessment practices disproportionately affect disadvantaged learners, making it essential to use data to examine the impact of assessment design on diverse student groups (Waring and Evans 2024). The Academic Skills Feedback and Marking Rubric (ASR) facilitates data-driven assessment by enabling lecturers to evaluate student skill development and assess the fairness and clarity of their assessments. The ASR provides valuable insights into student performance, helping lecturers understand variations across student groups and identify underlying causes. Consequently, the ASR serves as a diagnostic tool for improving pedagogical strategies, assessment designs, and ensuring fairness in academic assessments.

The following sections describe the SkillSense workshops, outline its theoretical basis, and present findings from a mixed-methods evaluation conducted with first-year undergraduate students across two academic years.

The SkillSense programme: Embracing a 'Community of Practice approach'

The SkillSense Programme comprises of structured workshops delivered in the first semester of Level Four. Rooted in theories of scaffolding and Communities of Practice (CoP), the programme is designed to teach assessment literacy and enhance student confidence, reflective thinking, and engagement with academic feedback.

Each workshop is highly interactive and includes group discussions, hands-on peer review exercises, self-assessment using a detailed rubric, and activities that explicitly link academic skills to marking criteria. These components are built around the Academic Skills Rubric (ASR), which serves both as an instructional and diagnostic tool. The workshops aim not only to demystify assessment practices but to develop the language, confidence, and critical reflection skills necessary to succeed in higher education.

Programme Structure

The first workshop introduces students to the structure and expectations of academic assessments. Using examples of past student work, participants are guided through how to interpret assessment briefs and identify learning outcomes. Small-group exercises are used to analyse assessment prompts, focusing on how instructional verbs (e.g., “evaluate,” “compare,” “justify”) relate to underlying academic skills.

In the second workshop, students engage in peer assessment using anonymised excerpts of assignments. Working in pairs or small groups, students apply the ASR to evaluate the work, compare their assessments with the lecturer's feedback, and discuss discrepancies. This exercise simulates the role of an academic marker, deepening students' understanding of assessment criteria and enhancing their evaluative judgment. The peer and self-assessment processes contribute to an effective learning cycle that strengthens confidence and promotes efficient learning (Bandura, 1997). At the same time, the collaborative nature of the workshops cultivates a joint enterprise within the community of practice (CoP), where students work together toward common goals (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1998). To achieve this collective goal, students acquire a shared set of resources, including the specialised language of assessment (Holmes, 2006).

The third workshop focuses on self-assessment and feedback literacy. Students bring drafts of their own work and use the ASR to self-assess against the marking criteria. They then write a short reflection outlining their perceived strengths and areas for improvement. In some cases, students exchange drafts for peer feedback, offering constructive commentary using the language of the rubric. Lecturers provide guided support and clarification throughout.

Between workshops, students complete take-home tasks that build on workshop content—for example, revising their draft based on peer feedback, identifying evidence of academic skills in a reading, or annotating assessment questions with rubric-aligned expectations.

Importantly, SkillSense is embedded within students' existing modules, ensuring that the assessment skills developed are immediately applicable to real coursework. Instructors tailor workshop examples and discussions to specific assessment tasks, fostering relevance and

engagement. Rather than treating academic skills as abstract or general, SkillSense contextualises them within each student's academic discipline.

Enhancing Feedback Literacy and Learner Agency

A core goal of SkillSense is to shift students from passive recipients of feedback to active users of it. Workshops includes time for students to reflect on how they've previously used feedback, what challenges they've encountered, and how they plan to integrate future feedback into their work. Emphasis is placed on converting feedback into "feedforward"—concrete action steps for improvement.

To develop learner agency, students are encouraged to set assessment goals, monitor their own progress, and seek clarification where needed. The ASR enables students to track their growth across multiple submissions, helping them recognise skill development over time. This process contributes to a stronger academic identity by giving students the tools to navigate assessments independently and confidently. Most importantly, students learn to take responsibility for their own learning by actively engaging with feedback, which enhances their self-efficacy and self-regulation (Evans and Waring, 2024)

Although proprietary materials (e.g., full rubrics and session plans) are not publicly available due to ongoing consultancy development, this paper provides sufficient context to evaluate the structure and pedagogical rationale of SkillSense. The subsequent section presents the programme's evaluation findings based on data from student cohorts between 2022 and 2024. Furthermore, the goal of this paper is no to provide a comprehensive breakdown of the programme itself. Instead, it focuses on engagement with SkillSense has influenced students' confidence and understanding of the academic assessment process.

Evaluating the SkillSense Programme

The focus of this paper is the Evaluation of the SkillSense Programme implemented over two consecutive academic years at a UK Higher Education Institution: first in Autumn 2022 (September to December), and again in Autumn 2023. The programme was embedded within two Level Four modules across the Humanities each year. In total, 106 students participated in the Programme—56 in the 2022–23 cohort and 50 in the 2023–24 cohort. The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Students completed a pre-programme survey designed to capture their baseline understanding of assessment-related concepts and confidence levels. Following the final workshop, a post-programme survey was administered, consisting of 20 items. These included:

- Likert-scale questions (e.g., " Taking the SkillSense workshops has motivated me to engage more actively in my learning and the assessment process" rated from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, Very Confident to Not Confident etc)
- Categorical questions (e.g., Do you feel that participating in the SkillSense Programme has enhanced your understanding of academic writing, the terminology used, and key assessment elements, such as marking criteria, marking rubrics, and learning outcomes? Yes, No, Don't Know)

- Multiple choice items on skill awareness (Tick all that apply)
- Several open-ended questions inviting students to describe what they found most helpful about the programme and how it impacted their approach to assessments

As the post programme survey was not conducted until 4 weeks after the Programme workshops took place (to allow students to employ their new skills), uptake was low. This paper summarises both the numerical trends and personal insights gathered from students in **one** Humanities module that ran across both years who student's participated in the Programme. The study includes:

- Survey Data: Collected after the Programme delivery from 29 students across two yearly cohorts:
 - Level 4 cohort from September 2022 to December 2023 (19 students completed the post survey giving a 34% completion rate)
 - Level 4 cohort from September 2023 to December 2024 (10 students giving a 20% completion rate)

In addition, two semi-structured focus groups were conducted with volunteer students who had completed the survey. Each group consisted of four students: one group from the 2022–23 cohort and one from the 2023–24 cohort, totalling eight students. These focus groups explored student perceptions of SkillSense in more depth, including its impact on their confidence, academic identity, and assessment engagement.

Thematic analysis of open-text responses and focus group transcripts was used to extract qualitative insights. Quotations used in this paper are explicitly attributed to either open-ended survey responses or focus group interviews, and the distinction is clearly highlighted throughout the results section. Ethical approval for the evaluation was granted by the institution under protocol number aSHE/SF/UH/05730(1), and all participants gave informed consent.

Results

The following findings illustrate the positive effects of the programme across various dimensions. These include improvements in students' comprehension of grading criteria, enhanced confidence in using assessment guidelines, better use of feedback, and an overall positive shift in understanding the application of an ASR.

Understanding and Demonstrating Academic Skills; Applying Academic Knowledge to Meet Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of all SkillSense workshops, participants were asked to reflect on their comprehension and use of academic skills developed through the Programme. The survey asked students to evaluate their understanding of demonstrating academic skills in assessment writing. Results showed that 21 students fully understood these skills, seven mostly understood, and one was still in the process of developing their understanding. The ASR contributed significantly to their ability to grasp academic skills and, more importantly, to

demonstrate them in their own writing. These skills were found to be transferable, with all students applying them to various assessments in different modules. One focus group student commented:

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

Participants were also asked to assess their grasp of how academic skills relate to marking criteria and learning outcomes. Responses revealed that 21 students fully understood this connection, six mostly understood, and two were still developing an understanding. For example, one student shared in the survey that the ASR helped them better understand the marking criteria, enabling them to break down each element required to achieve the expected grade:

"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."

Participants were also surveyed on their confidence in applying the academic skills acquired during the programme. The responses indicated that 15 students were very confident, 11 were fairly confident, and two were still developing confidence in applying these skills.

Participants were asked about the effectiveness of self- and peer-assessment activities, including peer marking using the lecturer's feedback and the ASR. Results showed that 14 students strongly agreed and 15 agreed that these elements significantly contributed to their skill development. Focus group discussions emphasised that the Programme enhanced students' evaluative judgment, enabling them to better assess the quality of others' work as well as their own.

Confidence in Interpreting Essay Questions and Using Marking Criteria

This section explores how SkillSense impacted participants' ability to use marking criteria in assessments and their proficiency in interpreting assessment briefs and questions. When participants were asked about their confidence in using marking criteria post-programme, 16 felt much more confident, eight were fairly confident, and five were still developing confidence. This positive shift suggests that SkillSense effectively boosted participants' competence in applying marking criteria in their assessments. Importantly, no students reported a lack of confidence, indicating the programme's overall success in fostering confidence.

All focus group participants agreed that the programme helped them better interpret assignment briefs and questions. They reported that they were now able to analyse instructional verbs in assessment prompts to understand the expected outcomes. This improved understanding enabled them to draft their work more effectively, aligning their responses with the marking criteria and academic skills required. One focus group student commented:

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

Understanding the Assessment Process and Increased Engagement in Learning

To assess students' understanding of the academic assessment process, the evaluation sought to measure the impact of SkillSense on their grasp of learning outcomes and the use of marking criteria. The study also explored how the Programme influenced students' perception of assessments at the university level and their motivation to engage with learning and assessment. Post-programme, 92% of participants reported a clearer understanding of learning outcomes, highlighting the Programme's role in clarifying assessment expectations.

Participants indicated that SkillSense had helped them navigate the academic assessment process by enhancing their understanding of academic skills and their application. They also found value in using marking criteria to strategically structure their work. One survey comment claimed;

“I understand the things I'm supposed to talk about 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.”

When asked about their understanding of marking criteria, 14 students reported full understanding, nine mostly understood, and four were still developing their comprehension. This suggests a positive trend in students' understanding of marking criteria post-programme as this quote suggests:

“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 to meet the marking criteria and brief.”

The programme also had a positive influence on students' perception of assessments. Twenty-two students strongly agreed, five agreed, and two were neutral about the workshops enhancing their understanding of university-level assessments. Furthermore, 92% of students agreed that the Programme motivated them to engage more in both their learning and the assessment process.

Effectively Using Feedback: Assessment Results

A key objective of SkillSense was to enhance students' ability to interpret and apply feedback to improve their academic work. Alongside student voice from survey and focus groups, this was measured using comparative assessment data from two intervention cohorts (2022–23 and 2023–24) and a non-intervention (control) cohort from 2021–22.

In the module evaluated, for their assessment students were required to complete:

- A first submission (weighted at 30%), submitted mid-semester.

- A revised submission (weighted at 60%), revised using feedback on the first submission.
- A reflective report (10%) explaining how feedback was used and why this improved their work in regards to their demonstration of academic skills and Learning Outcomes.

Assessment outcomes revealed significant improvements following SkillSense implementation:

- 2022–23 cohort (n = 56): average scores increased from 56.88% (first submission) to 66.63% (final submission). One student improved from 62% (2:1) to 85% (First). The module failure rate dropped from 36% to 6%.
- 2023–24 cohort (n = 50): average scores increased from 54.81% to 64.35%, with six students improving by two grade boundaries¹. Two students improved from 72% to 85%. The failure rate decreased to 0%.

For comparison, the 2021–22 control cohort (n = 58)—which did not receive SkillSense—showed only minor gains from first draft to final submission. For example an increase from 45 to 48%, with some not improving at all (or averaging worse on second attempt). The average grade improvement between summative submissions was 3.5%, and no students improved by a full grade boundary. Failure rates of the module sat at 31%.

These results suggest that SkillSense played a meaningful role in helping students act on feedback and improve assessment outcomes. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the presence of the programme itself may have introduced motivational or observational biases. For instance, students in the intervention cohorts may have engaged more deeply with feedback due to increased attention and perceived academic support. Future studies should control for these effects more rigorously—e.g., via blinded intervention designs or comparative trials with matched instruction time.

Conclusion

Although the evaluation discussed in this paper was conducted within a specific subject area and educational level, findings suggest that programmes such as SkillSense can offer a valuable framework for improving students' engagement with academic assessment. By drawing from established literature on assessment literacy, feedback, and reflective learning, this paper situates SkillSense within a broader pedagogical context that emphasizes student agency and scaffolded learning. For example, Black and Wiliam (1998) advocate for feedback-rich environments to support skill acquisition, a principle embedded in SkillSense's design. Similarly, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) highlight the role of self-regulation and peer

¹ Grade boundaries follow the UK classification system:

- <40% = Fail
- 40–49% = Third Class
- 50–59% = Lower Second (2:2)
- 60–69% = Upper Second (2:1)
- 70–100% = First Class

review in fostering deeper learning—an outcome reflected in the increased evaluative confidence and academic engagement observed among SkillSense participants.

Notably, the programme's implementation coincided with measurable improvements in academic outcomes, including reduced failure rates and more significant gains in final assessment scores compared to a control cohort. These findings support arguments made by Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Evans and Waring (2024), who link assessment understanding and feedback literacy to improved academic performance. Importantly, SkillSense also contributed to students' sense of belonging and academic identity. By explicitly teaching assessment language, aligning activities with real coursework, and embedding reflective practice, the programme supports students' transition into the academic Community of Practice (CoP). This constructivist approach echoes the work of Almulla (2023) and Gosavi and Arora (2022), who argue that active learning strategies enhance student confidence, skill development, and overall engagement.

While SkillSense is not structured as a CoP itself, it serves as an effective bridge—supporting students as they move from peripheral participation to more central involvement in academic life. Since the publication of this paper, the programme's flexibility has enabled its adaptation across disciplines including Business Studies, Science, Music, and Early Years Education, as well as across several U.K Further Education Colleges and several U.K and International Higher Education Institutions (see McDowell, under review), suggesting broad applicability. Structured programmes like SkillSense offer a replicable model for integrating assessment literacy, reflective practice, and feedback engagement into the curriculum. By equipping students with tools for critical self-assessment and skill articulation, SkillSense not only enhances academic performance but also fosters learner agency and resilience.

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