

# From Coping to Confidence: Linking Wellbeing and Flexibility in Assessment

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## Abstract

This case study explores the role of flexible assessment in enhancing student voice, wellbeing, and confidence in higher education. Building on doctoral research that identified coping as a central theme in student wellbeing, it considers how curriculum design can act as a structural intervention to support confidence. A flexible assessment approach was introduced in the opening module of a Level 6 top-up degree, enabling students to choose their own learning outcomes and assessment methods.

Student reflections highlighted three key outcomes: increased confidence, stronger motivation and engagement, and improved preparedness for subsequent prescribed assessments. While flexible assessment did not significantly alter grades, students consistently described feeling “trusted” and more capable, emphasising that early autonomy reduced anxiety and helped them approach later challenges with resilience.

This case study suggests that flexible assessment should not be viewed as a universal replacement for traditional tasks but as a strategic tool to support transition points where confidence is most at risk. For institutions, this reflection highlights how embedding student voice into assessment can align with priorities around inclusion, engagement, and wellbeing, as articulated in sector frameworks such as the Teaching Excellence Framework. Ultimately, flexible assessment illustrates how moving from coping to confidence can create the conditions for learners to thrive in higher education.

## Introduction

Assessment continues to be one of the most significant influences on how students experience higher education. For many, the process generates considerable stress—not just academically but emotionally—impacting their sense of belonging and self-confidence (Jack & Eynon, 2021). The sector is therefore under pressure to move beyond traditional fixed-method assessments toward more flexible, inclusive, and authentic alternatives (Barua & Lockee, 2025; Elkington, 2024). These approaches seek not only academic precision but also emotional and agency-enhancing outcomes with students at the centre.

My doctoral research revealed coping via mindfulness as a primary strategy that many students employ to navigate the pressures of university life. While valuable at the individual level, personal strategies alone aren’t enough. Institutional practices—especially assessment design—play a significant role in either compounding stress or supporting confidence. Emerging research suggests that when flexible assessment is carefully structured—incorporating varied formats, deadlines, and feedback—it can

actually bolster motivation and self-efficacy, provided choice is not overwhelming (Barua & Lockee, 2025) and implementation is intentional.

To explore this idea, a flexible assessment strategy was piloted in the opening module of a Level 6 top-up programme, allowing students to choose their own learning outcome and method (e.g., essay, presentation, creative artefact). This practice aligns with recent findings that flexibility in higher education—including in assessment, teaching pace, and content delivery—can enhance emotional engagement and cognitive resilience (Kuluşaklı, 2025), especially when paired with autonomy-supportive design.

This case study reflects on that experience. It does not claim universal applicability, but it proposes that flexible assessment may function as a structural pathway *from* coping to confidence when used thoughtfully at points of academic transition. Drawing on student voice collected and analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), the following sections examine how autonomy shaped confidence, motivation, and resilience; how staff responded; and what this might mean for inclusive curriculum design. In doing so, the study resonates with established theories of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), while grounding the argument in up-to-date literature and educational discourse.

Assessment practices profoundly influence students' emotional and cognitive experiences, often serving as sources of anxiety and alienation (Jack & Eynon, 2021). In response, the sector is increasingly embracing flexible assessment strategies offering options in format, deadlines, weighting, and delivery to enhance engagement, equity, and learning satisfaction (Barua & Lockee, 2025; Lumbini & Lockee, 2025).

While the benefits are promising, evidence also highlights the need for careful design. Without clear guidance, students may experience choice overload, and instructors may face increased workload (Cowan, 2024; Lumbini & Lockee, 2025). Yet, when structured deliberately, flexibility can help learners transition from mere coping with managing stress to confidence in their abilities.

At the heart of this transition is autonomy, a cornerstone of both motivation and wellbeing. Self-Determination Theory establishes that environments which support choice strengthen intrinsic motivation and emotional resilience (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Similarly, Bandura's theory of self-efficacy suggests that early experiences of mastery enhance students' belief in their future performance (Bandura, 1997). These frameworks align with recent findings that flexible assessment can be life-changing for students, offering meaningful control and enhancing engagement (Kessels, 2024).

Emerging studies reinforce these claims. For example, Kessels (2024) found that in vocational contexts, choice in assessment format, timing, and retry opportunities boosted learner motivation and autonomy, especially when educators provided scaffolding throughout the process (e.g., offering fewer options initially, then tapering guidance over time). Another study on psychologically flexible study-skills training found that strengthening psychological flexibility contributed directly to the emotional

resilience and self-management necessary for academic success (Katajavuori et al., 2025).

Flexibility is not limited to assessment formats alone. Other forms, such as ePortfolios, have shown benefits for wellbeing, enhancing self-awareness, identity building, and reflective practice - all essential for transitioning from coping to confidence (McCarthy et al., 2025). Similarly, assessment-by-engagement models that combine dialogic feedback with co-created tasks enhance learners' confidence by positioning them as partners in the assessment process (Folwell, 2025).

Despite endorsements for flexible assessment, challenges remain around fairness, marking load, and maintaining academic standards. Consistent use of shared rubrics can help preserve rigour, especially when criteria focus on criticality, theoretical application, and disciplinary knowledge, rather than format (Sambell et al., 2013). This aligns with students' expressed needs for trust, clarity, and equitable judgement across varied modes. Such structures bridge theory to practice, demonstrating how flexibility can support a transition from coping with survival in assessment to confident, proactive agency in learning.

In summary, the literature underscores that well-designed flexible assessment can enhance student voice, facilitate wellbeing, and foster confidence, especially at key transition points. It aligns with foundational theories of autonomy and self-efficacy while drawing on current empirical evidence. This gives a strong rationale for the forthcoming reflective case study, which examines how integrating flexible assessment in practice cultivated confidence among Level 6 learners.

### **Case Study Context and Implementation**

This case study is drawn from the first module of a Level 6 BA Education Studies top-up programme at a college-based higher education provider. The module encouraged students to think critically about the education system through philosophical perspectives, and was deliberately chosen as the starting point of the final year to support the transition from Level 5 to Level 6 study.

A flexible assessment design was introduced in place of a single prescribed task. Students were invited to identify their own assessment topic, such as a critical evaluation of standardised testing in the UK, and then determine how best to showcase their knowledge. Options included essays, presentations, or other creative formats. Regardless of the chosen format, all submissions were assessed against a common rubric focusing on subject knowledge and understanding, analytical depth, academic skills, and application to professional and industry contexts.

The rationale was to enable students to begin the final year with a sense of agency and ownership over their work, reducing anxiety and building confidence for subsequent, more structured modules.

Ethical approval for the project was granted through the Loughborough College Ethics Committee. Student reflections were captured through informal feedback at the end of both the flexible module and the subsequent prescribed module, enabling a comparison of experiences across the two contexts. The feedback was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasises researcher reflexivity and the co-construction of meaning. This approach was particularly appropriate for a practice-focused case study, as it enabled themes to be developed not only from the data but also in dialogue with professional experience, ensuring the findings were closely aligned with implications for teaching practice.

## **Findings and Reflections**

Analysis of student reflections from the flexible module, compared with those from the subsequent prescribed module, highlighted three key themes: confidence and ownership, motivation and engagement, and preparedness for prescribed assessments. These themes were constructed reflexively (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), focusing on patterns most relevant to practice implementation and the amplification of student voice. Together, they illustrate a progression from *coping* with the demands of transition to developing confidence in facing more structured academic tasks.

### *Theme 1: Confidence and Ownership*

Students consistently reported that flexible assessment gave them a stronger sense of ownership and trust. One student explained:

*“I actually felt like I was being taken seriously. Like, I know how I work best, and I got to show that.”*

This sense of autonomy echoes Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, where mastery experiences strengthen belief in one's capabilities, and also aligns with Deci and Ryan's (2000) assertion that autonomy is a critical driver of intrinsic motivation.

### *Theme 2: Motivation and Engagement*

Students also described being more motivated and emotionally invested when they could choose how to evidence their learning. For example:

*“I hate writing essays, but I love speaking. Doing a presentation meant I didn't dread the assignment.”*

Such reflections support recent research showing that flexible assessment can enhance emotional engagement when paired with clear scaffolding (Kessels, 2024), as well as Cowan's (2024) argument that personalised approaches can reduce anxiety and promote persistence.

### *Theme 3: Preparedness for Prescribed Assessments*

Perhaps the most significant theme was that flexibility in the first module helped students feel more prepared for prescribed formats in later modules. One student commented:

*“Once I knew I could do well in my own way, I felt more ready for the next challenge—even though it was more structured.”*

This resonates with Tinto’s (2017) view that early success builds persistence, and with recent studies suggesting that scaffolded choice supports resilience and readiness for future tasks (Barua & Lockee, 2025).

### Summary of Themes

Theme	Illustrative Student Quote
<b>Confidence and Ownership</b>	“I actually felt like I was being taken seriously. Like, I know how I work best, and I got to show that.”
<b>Motivation and Engagement</b>	“Doing a presentation meant I didn’t dread the assignment.”
<b>Preparedness</b>	“Once I knew I could do well in my own way, I felt more ready for the next challenge.”

### Discussion

The findings from this case study suggest that flexible assessment can act as a valuable bridge between coping and confidence at critical points of transition in higher education. Students’ reflections highlighted how agency, choice, and trust shaped their experience, resonating with established theories of autonomy and self-efficacy (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Bandura, 1997).

The first theme, confidence and ownership, underscored how autonomy in assessment enabled students to feel “taken seriously.” This mirrors findings from Kessels (2024), who observed that scaffolding choice in assessment strengthened learners’ belief in their capacity to succeed. From the perspective of wellbeing, this is significant: my doctoral research showed that students often rely on coping strategies to manage assessment stress, but structural interventions such as flexible assessment can create conditions where confidence replaces mere endurance.

The second theme, motivation and engagement, demonstrated how choice encouraged students to invest more deeply in their work. This supports Cowan’s (2024) argument that personalised assessment reduces anxiety and fosters persistence, and aligns with more recent work highlighting the link between flexible learning environments and emotional engagement (Barua & Lockee, 2025). Importantly, students did not perceive choice as an “easy option”; rather, they described working harder and producing outcomes they were proud of, echoing Edwards’ (2020) claim that meaningful learning often comes through agency, not prescription.

The third theme, preparedness for prescribed assessments, points to the strategic potential of flexibility. Students consistently described feeling more capable when approaching structured tasks after experiencing success on their own terms. This aligns with Tinto's (2017) emphasis on early success as a foundation for persistence and with Katajavuori et al.'s (2025) findings that psychological flexibility supports resilience in later academic challenges. Flexible assessment, therefore, may function most effectively not as a universal replacement for traditional methods, but as a targeted intervention at points where confidence is most vulnerable.

For the wider sector, this has particular resonance. Current policy priorities emphasise student engagement, inclusion, and wellbeing, with frameworks such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (OfS, 2023) encouraging institutions to demonstrate impact on these dimensions. Flexible assessment provides a tangible way of embedding student voice within curriculum design, supporting inclusivity while maintaining academic rigour through consistent marking frameworks. For college-based higher education, where cohorts are often small and diverse, this offers an especially powerful means of building confidence and promoting engagement.

Ultimately, the reflections from this case study highlight the importance of recognising assessment not only as a measure of learning but also as a determinant of student wellbeing and identity. By allowing students to move from coping with assessment pressures to developing confidence in their abilities, flexible assessment illustrates how curriculum design can play a direct role in supporting thriving learners in higher education.

### **Implications for Practice**

This case study reinforces that flexible assessment has value not as a universal model but as a strategic tool for supporting confidence, wellbeing, and engagement. For practitioners and institutions, several implications emerge:

1. **Introduce flexibility early at transition points.** Allowing students to evidence learning in their own way at the start of a programme or level can reduce anxiety and build confidence for subsequent prescribed assessments.
2. **Maintain fairness through consistent rubrics.** Using common marking criteria across formats ensures parity of challenge and prevents flexibility from being seen as lowering standards.
3. **Scaffold choice.** Students benefit most when given guidance and exemplars, particularly when encountering unfamiliar assessment formats. Scaffolding helps them move from coping to confidence without feeling overwhelmed by options.
4. **Value student voice in curriculum design.** Incorporating feedback on assessment methods into module evaluation demonstrates that learners are trusted partners in shaping their educational experience.

5. **Connect assessment to wellbeing agendas.** Recognising assessment as both a learning and wellbeing practice can align teaching with institutional priorities around inclusion, engagement, and student success.

Together, these implications suggest that flexible assessment is not simply a pedagogical innovation but a practical means of embedding confidence, autonomy, and resilience into higher education practice.

## **Conclusion**

This case study suggests that flexible assessment can play a significant role in supporting students' transition from coping with assessment anxiety to developing confidence in their academic abilities. While grades did not markedly improve, the sense of ownership and motivation students described indicates that autonomy itself has wellbeing benefits. Importantly, flexibility does not need to compromise academic rigour; with consistent rubrics and careful scaffolding, it can sit alongside prescribed tasks as a strategic intervention. Positioned at key transition points, flexible assessment offers a way to embed student voice, foster engagement, and promote resilience. In doing so, it illustrates how curriculum design can directly contribute to creating the conditions in which all learners can thrive.

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