



Improving Assessment Literacy in Accelerated Partnership Programmes: Practitioner insights from business education

Ashraf Islam *Lecturer, Bath Spa University London (Canary Wharf) (a.islam@bathspa.ac.uk)*

Key Words: assessment literacy; accelerated programmes; partnership provision; feedback literacy; inclusive assessment

DOI: [10.17870/bathspa.00017846](https://doi.org/10.17870/bathspa.00017846)

“Students’ reported confidence suggests that front-loading assessment literacy may reduce anxiety and enable more purposeful engagement with learning tasks”

Introduction

Accelerated undergraduate programmes delivered through partnership models play an increasingly significant role in widening participation within UK higher education (Thomas, 2012). Such provision offers flexible and accessible routes into degree-level study for mature learners, international students and first-generation entrants to higher education who may not have followed traditional academic pathways. Within business education in particular, accelerated models are frequently positioned as responsive, practice-oriented and closely aligned to employability outcomes.

However, the benefits of accelerated delivery are accompanied by structural and pedagogic challenges. Compressed teaching blocks, intensive timetables and shortened assessment cycles can intensify early uncertainty around academic expectations, particularly where students are unfamiliar with disciplinary conventions and assessment standards (O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2008). Students are often required to engage rapidly with assessment criteria and feedback practices, with limited opportunity to acquire these implicitly over time. Where assessment standards remain tacit, students may adopt surface approaches to learning or focus narrowly on task completion rather than conceptual understanding (Rust, Price and O'Donovan, 2003).

Assessment literacy—commonly understood as students’ capacity to interpret assessment criteria, understand academic standards and engage productively with feedback—has been consistently linked to improved confidence, engagement and academic performance (Sadler, 2010; Carless and Boud, 2018). Students who are assessment-literate are better positioned to judge the quality of their own work, act on feedback and regulate their learning across modules and academic levels

(Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Yet within accelerated partnership provision, opportunities to develop assessment literacy gradually are often constrained, particularly where students’ prior educational experiences are highly variable.

This article reports on a practitioner-led evaluation of an assessment-literacy intervention embedded across three undergraduate business modules delivered through a partnership programme within Bath Spa University’s collaborative network. Rather than treating assessment literacy as a generic academic skill, the intervention embedded explicit assessment support within the specific demands of examinations, group-based coursework and individual project work, reflecting research that emphasises the contextual and disciplinary nature of assessment understanding (O'Donovan et al., 2008). The article explores how early, assessment-aligned activities influenced students’ understanding of expectations, confidence in approaching assessment and engagement with formative feedback within an intensive delivery context.

Context and rationale

The intervention was implemented within an accelerated undergraduate business programme delivered through a partnership arrangement as part of Bath Spa University’s collaborative provision. The programme operates on a compressed two-year model and recruits diverse cohorts, including mature learners returning to education, international students and first-generation entrants to higher education. Many students balance study alongside employment and caring responsibilities, further intensifying the demands associated with accelerated delivery.





Analysis of progression boards, moderation commentary and student-support data from a previous cohort identified recurring challenges. These included weak early alignment between student submissions and marking criteria, limited evidence of formative feedback being acted upon, and referral and deferral rates at Level 4 exceeding institutional benchmarks. Moderation discussions frequently noted that, while students demonstrated descriptive knowledge, they struggled to meet expectations around evaluation, academic writing and application of theory to context—patterns commonly associated with limited assessment literacy (Sadler, 2010).

Student feedback reinforced these concerns. Learners reported uncertainty around how assessment criteria were weighted, what constituted critical analysis, and how feedback should be used to improve subsequent work. Such findings align with research suggesting that assessment cultures in higher education often function as a hidden curriculum, requiring students to infer expectations that academic staff may regard as self-evident (Rust et al., 2003; O'Donovan et al., 2008). These tacit practices can disproportionately disadvantage students from non-traditional educational backgrounds (Thomas, 2012).

Within accelerated partnership contexts, these challenges may be amplified. Students have less time to adjust to academic norms, fewer opportunities to learn expectations implicitly through trial and error, and limited scope to recover from early misunderstandings. Research on student engagement and belonging further suggests that early clarity around academic expectations is particularly important for

widening-participation cohorts, as uncertainty can undermine confidence, persistence and progression (Thomas, 2012).

The assessment-literacy intervention described here was therefore designed for the subsequent cohort, drawing explicitly on lessons from earlier delivery. The primary aim was to make assessment expectations visible from the outset of each module and to position formative activity as integral to learning rather than optional or remedial, consistent with principles of assessment for learning (Black and Wiliam, 2009).

Designing the assessment-literacy intervention

Rather than adopting a single generic approach, the intervention was deliberately assessment-type and discipline-sensitive. This design reflected research suggesting that assessment literacy develops differently across examinations, coursework and collaborative assessments, and cannot be assumed to transfer automatically between modes (Sadler, 2010). Early learning activities were explicitly aligned to the structure, criteria and demands of each summative assessment, supporting the development of evaluative judgement through repeated, low-stakes practice (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Economics & Globalisation (Level 4, n = 35)

Economics & Globalisation is assessed through a time-constrained unseen examination. Previous cohorts frequently reported uncertainty regarding what constituted a high-quality exam response, particularly in relation to structure, evaluation and application of theory under time pressure—issues well documented in the literature on assessment transparency (O'Donovan et al., 2008). To address this, Nearpod (an interactive instructional and presentation platform used by educators to create engaging, slide-based lessons) was embedded into weekly teaching sessions from the outset of the module. Students completed short, timed exam-style questions aligned directly to the published marking criteria. These activities were followed by whole-class discussion of anonymised responses, with tutor-led walkthroughs focusing explicitly on how marks were awarded for knowledge, application and evaluation. This modelling of academic judgement reflects principles of formative assessment that emphasise making standards explicit (Black and Wiliam, 2009). Repeated low-stakes exposure reframed the examination as a familiar academic practice rather than a one-off, high-stakes event, supporting students to internalise standards and develop confidence (Sadler, 2010).

Innovation Management (Level 5, n = 44)

Innovation Management is assessed through a substantial group report designed to mirror industry-based project work. Earlier delivery highlighted challenges relating to uneven participation, limited student ownership of assessment processes and late engagement with criteria. In response, each group formally allocated a Project Manager at the start of the module. This role was embedded within the assessment





design and required students to coordinate tasks, manage deadlines and act as a liaison between the group and the tutor. Shifting organisational responsibility towards students supported empowerment and professional accountability, aligning with research on self-regulated learning and feedback literacy (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Carless and Boud, 2018). Assessment support was further enhanced through a closed Padlet space (a cloud-based platform that functions as a digital canvas or interactive bulletin board), accessible only to enrolled students via a class-specific QR code. Padlet was used to share exemplars, clarify assessment expectations and facilitate dialogic discussion around criteria. This approach positioned feedback as a shared and iterative process rather than a unidirectional transmission of information (Carless and Boud, 2018).

International Business (Level 5, n = 44)

International Business is assessed through an individual project consisting of a proposal and a final report. Students conduct a comparative analysis of an international company's domestic and international operations, focusing on national culture, social norms and ethical considerations. Early assessment-literacy support was tightly aligned to the assignment brief. From the opening weeks, students participated in structured seminar discussions exploring companies operating in their home countries and cultural influences on business practice. These discussions were explicitly mapped to assessment themes, supporting constructive alignment between teaching activities and assessment criteria (Black and Wiliam, 2009). Formative feedback was provided on proposal ideas, which required tutor approval before progression to the final report. This early checkpoint supported students to refine scope and analytical focus, reducing uncertainty and promoting purposeful engagement with the assessment task (Sadler, 2010).

Methodology

A mixed-methods practitioner-research approach was adopted, consistent with enhancement-focused evaluation in teaching and learning scholarship (Black and Wiliam, 2009). Quantitative data comprised cohort sizes, completion rates for compulsory formative activities, and post-intervention questionnaire responses (n = 62). Qualitative data were drawn

from anonymised open-text responses and reflective teaching notes. The evaluation focused on students' understanding of assessment expectations, confidence and engagement with formative activity prior to summative submission, rather than on long-term attainment outcomes. Ethical approval was secured through institutional processes, and all data were anonymised.

Findings

Across the three modules, completion of compulsory formative activities exceeded 85 per cent, compared with under 50 per cent participation in earlier optional formative tasks. Questionnaire responses indicated consistently high confidence in understanding assessment expectations, with mean scores above 4.6 on a five-point Likert scale.

Students consistently valued early clarification of marking criteria, supporting existing research on transparency and student engagement (O'Donovan et al., 2008). Reflective teaching notes suggested stronger alignment between submissions and criteria, as well as increased confidence in academic language associated with evaluation and comparison.

In Economics & Globalisation, students specifically referenced the value of repeated exam-style practice in reducing anxiety and increasing familiarity with expectations. In Innovation Management, groups reported that allocating a Project Manager supported accountability and earlier engagement with criteria. In International Business, early proposal approval was perceived as reducing uncertainty and helping students focus their analysis more effectively.

Reflective teaching notes suggested stronger alignment between submissions and marking criteria, more focused seminar discussions and increased student confidence in using academic language related to evaluation and comparison.

Discussion

While this evaluation is situated within business education, the underlying principles of early transparency, assessment-type-specific scaffolding and dialogic formative engagement may be readily adapted to other accelerated or partnership-delivered disciplines facing similar challenges around assessment confidence and progression (O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2008; Thomas, 2012).

This practitioner-led evaluation demonstrates the value of early, assessment-aligned intervention within accelerated partnership programmes. Rather than positioning assessment literacy as a transferable academic skill detached from disciplinary context, the intervention embedded explicit assessment support within the specific demands of examinations, group-based project work and individual analytical assignments, reflecting research that emphasises the contextual and situated nature of assessment literacy (Sadler, 2010).





Across the three modules, assessment expectations were unpacked early and revisited regularly through low-stakes formative activity. By making marking criteria visible and modelling how academic judgement is exercised, the intervention supported students to develop clearer conceptions of quality (Rust, Price and O'Donovan, 2003; Black and Wiliam, 2009). Students' reported confidence suggests that front-loading assessment literacy may reduce anxiety and enable more purposeful engagement with learning tasks within intensive delivery models (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

The intervention also sought to reposition feedback as dialogic and forward-looking. Structured checkpoints, proposal approvals and peer-informed discussion spaces encouraged students to engage actively with criteria and feedback rather than viewing feedback as retrospective justification of grades, aligning with research emphasising student agency and self-regulation as central to effective feedback practice (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Carless and Boud, 2018).

Importantly, the design acknowledged the differing demands of assessment types. Treating examinations, group coursework and individual projects as distinct literacy challenges helped avoid assumptions about automatic transfer of assessment competence across modes, an issue highlighted in the assessment literacy literature (Sadler, 2010).

As a small-scale practitioner evaluation, findings should be interpreted cautiously. Cohort characteristics, parallel curriculum refinements and broader student-support initiatives may also have influenced outcomes. Nevertheless, the consistency of student perceptions across modules suggests that the intervention addressed a common challenge within accelerated partnership provision (Thomas, 2012).

Conclusion

This practitioner-led evaluation highlights how structured, early assessment support can enhance clarity, confidence and formative engagement within accelerated partnership programmes in business education. By aligning formative activities closely to the design and criteria of summative assessments, the intervention supported inclusive assessment practice while maintaining academic rigour.

For accelerated and partnership-delivered programmes, the findings reinforce the importance of making assessment standards explicit from the outset and embedding assessment literacy within everyday teaching rather than positioning it as remedial support. Front-loading assessment understanding within intensive delivery models may help reduce anxiety, promote purposeful engagement and support student confidence across diverse assessment types. While further longitudinal research is required to examine long-term effects on attainment and progression, this evaluation demonstrates the value of enhancement-focused curriculum design in strengthening assessment cultures within high-intensity learning environments.

References

- Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (2009) 'Developing the theory of formative assessment', *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), pp. 5–31.
- Carless, D. and Boud, D. (2018) 'The development of student feedback literacy: enabling uptake of feedback', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(8), pp. 1315–1325.
- Nicol, D. and Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006) 'Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice', *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), pp. 199–218.
- O'Donovan, B., Price, M. and Rust, C. (2008) 'Developing student understanding of assessment standards: a nested hierarchy of approaches', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(2), pp. 205–217.
- Rust, C., Price, M. and O'Donovan, B. (2003) 'Improving students' learning by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and processes', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28(2), pp. 147–164.
- Sadler, D.R. (2010) 'Beyond feedback: developing student capability in complex appraisal', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(5), pp. 535–550.
- Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.